

FIG. 9. The ~~Cooking tube~~ accelerating tube is shown in cross section in this diagram.

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The cover art of this book reappropriates diagrams by Burt Mader which are found in their original form in *Accelerators: Machines of Nuclear Physics*, from the Anchor/Doubleday Science Study Series, ©1960 Educational Services Incorporated, as salvaged from a library “book bin” in Greensburg, Pennsylvania, USA, the year 2002. Our condolences and best wishes are dedicated to Mr. Mader, the nuclear physics community, and all other relevant parties, known and unknown.

N.M. Courtright

But I'm Not a Chair

Currently, I'm constructing a fort out of overdue library books.
The project has already exceeded initial completion estimates
and costs are spiraling. Also, the taste of paper

yellowing by the day wreaks havoc on my sinuses.
With that in mind, let's talk about life. My life, specifically.
There's some shine to it, if you buff it awhile.

How I see it, there are two possibilities:
either I've spent it ravaged by disease or ravaged by convalescence.
Fines have made a doctor's visit impractical, so I'll receive no diagnosis.

But yesterday I tried to contain a sneeze
and the cleanup crew has savored every minute of overtime.
Those fifth-graders in the front row didn't know what hit 'em.

It was chaos, how quickly de Leon Auditorium emptied,
leaving only lonely row of chairs after lonely row of chairs.
If I were a chair you'd say I was electric.

N i m b u s

The truth is I'm covered with clouds,
and clouds are like sweat,
and you and I are like clouds.
Only the shapes we form aren't elephants.

We're paintings painted by painters
with little idea of good ideas:
there's rust here—

let's paint over it
with rust-colored paint.
It's been a long time

since someone sincerely
had the colic of a brushman, sincerely
pushing and pushing. But still, you and I
have veins where veins shouldn't be—

a river here, a delta there,
running under my eyelid, your navel.
Push—

someone has to lead, though,
from west to east, all clouds are followers.

Cynthia Alden Smith

It's A Long Way To Akureyri

Iceland is a treeless island isolated in the mid-Atlantic. Its north coast flirts with the Arctic Circle, and the southwest coast is warmed by the Gulf Stream. Iceland sits atop the juncture where the European and American tectonic plates pull apart, rending the land like torn cloth. Volcanoes, geysers, hot springs and gasses gurgle and erupt from rifts and fissures transecting the island.

I'm here for my cousin Ben's wedding to Heida ("HAY-tha"). Ben met Heida in Massachusetts where she was working as an au pair. Now they live in Boston. Heida, a native Iclander, is so fair she's translucent. Her face falls into a smile even at rest, but her slate-green eyes reveal her steely core. Via email and phone, she's coordinated her wedding in Iceland, arranged lodging and entertainment for twenty-seven unruly American relatives and friends, and planned her honeymoon – a five-day driving and camping trip with seventeen guests.

It's early July. Today we start the two-day drive to Höfn where the wedding will take place. We are unlikely traveling companions, this group. Our ages range from 72 to six and represent three generations. My mother, brother and sister are here. My stepfather is the oldest of the group and my nephew is the youngest. Ben's father is my mother's baby brother. When I was a teenager, Ben and his siblings were little kids, insurmountably younger than me. The summer after I graduated from high school, Ben's mom hired me as the mothers' helper for her children, nieces and nephews on the coast of Maine. Now, the children I drove to sailing lessons, watched at the pool and taught camp songs are adults, here with

their spouses and friends. Heida's mother is only three years older than me. I am adrift between generations.

The drive from Reykjavík to Kirkjubæjarklaustur where we'll spend the night takes us along the south coast through landscape so unfamiliar I struggle to find a comparison. As we leave town, we stop at a volcanic field. Under a concrete sky, great slabs of lava and earth heave up at sharp angles. The black lava is coated in moss, lichens and tiny wildflowers. Against the black, the greens fluoresce in the watery light. It's amazing that this delicate beauty resulted from such a brutal thrust. We cross a glacial river running in rapids, the water clouded with silt like malted milk. Hekla, a volcanic peak, looms in the distance. We glimpse a glacier at the horizon, a strip of white porcelain glittering against the cobalt sky.

We stop for a picnic lunch at Skógafoss, seventy meters of sheer white water spilling over a parrot green cliff. Sunlight hitting the mist at the bottom throws double rainbows into the air. A muddy path runs up the side to the top of the falls. At the top I find no barrier to the wide roiling stream rushing full tilt over the edge. The water doesn't flow in an orderly stream. It plunges against the banks. Ropes of current split, twist and converge, jostling against each other like ferrets struggling to escape a canvas sack. I walk down the grassy bank until my feet tilt sharply toward the water. I fight the desire to leap in and fly down the face of the falls. There's something seductive about plummeting out of control. I wonder if the fall would kill me, or if I'd only be badly injured.

I'm four years sober after 18 years of drinking and I'm still adjusting to life without alcohol. Some people in AA say that you have no defense against the first drink, that the impulse to grab a beer could strike as naturally as breathing. I don't think it's that simple. I think it's a choice, like standing here on the bank and deciding whether or not to lose my balance. Sometimes the choice is hard, sometimes easy. There's really nothing to prevent me from

sliding back into my old life. Slipping out of sobriety would feel like stepping over the falls – exhilaration followed by humiliation and pain. I'm balanced between two worlds, and it's up to me to tip the scale towards abstinence.

The countryside on the drive to Höfn is as otherworldly as the day before. We hike in light drizzle to Svartifoss, another waterfall. Ahead of us, mountains push through the gloom, sharp and jagged like the ones children draw. Svartifoss is a narrow plume plunging into a black-rock pool. We scramble on the rocks and climb behind the falling water. Looking up I see that the action of the falls has exposed hexagonal columns of basalt – perfect geometric order arisen from tumult.

Four years ago, I had a nervous breakdown. I used to think a nervous breakdown was romantic. I clung to a vision of swooning women in gauzy white nightgowns reclining in darkened rooms. “Hush, she's had a nervous breakdown, don't trouble her with the responsibilities of life.” The reality is harsher and mundane.

After nine years of living with an increasingly distant alcoholic wife, my husband kicked me out of the marriage. My life ruptured at that moment, but I didn't roll my eyes back or throw myself down a flight of stairs. I checked into a hospital rehab, curled into a fetal ball and shook and cried uncontrollably and unceasingly for three days.

The chaos that overtook my life revealed a core of strength I didn't suspect. I found rough rock under the muck and my feet stopped slipping. I knew there was a structure on which I could build a different life. I just didn't know at the time how to make it happen.

We reach Höfn. Tonight is the rehearsal dinner at Heida's grandparents' house. We meet more Icelanders – Heida's relatives and her parents' friends. A picnic had been planned, but it is too wet so we all crowd into the house. Icelanders, like many Scandinavians,

learn English as children. What little language barrier exists is quickly erased by free-flowing beer. My six-year-old nephew and two new friends tear through the rooms, communicating in International Boy. The excited chatter of the Icelanders and Americans fills the house.

Heida's father, Sigurjón, parades into the living room with a platter of hakarl, an Icelandic delicacy. He sets it down with pomp.

"What is it?" I ask, eyeing the grayish pink cubes.

"Raw shark."

"Sushi?"

"Not really."

There is a ritual to eating hakarl. He spears a chunk with a toothpick and presents it to me with a shot glass of brennivin, a potent aquavit. I decline the liquor.

"I don't drink," I say.

Heida's father grabs my hand and pushes the glass into it. I bite down on the shark. It's as rubbery as octopus. Ammonia shoots up my sinuses and an acrid essence of fish fills my mouth. Only good manners stop me from spitting it out. I swallow it whole. Grinning, Sigurjón pantomimes knocking back the shot.

"I don't drink," I choke. "Please, water!"

Heida comes to my rescue with a soda. I gulp it down.

"What the *hell* was that?" I gasp.

"It is a traditional Icelandic food we eat at feasts, usually in the winter. It's raw shark buried in the ground for three or four months until it rots. My father thinks it is tasty." She throws a glance at Sigurjón and adds sotto voce, "I hate it."

Drinking is a participatory sport in Iceland. Iceland is so far north that the winters are as dark as the summers are light. There is little to do in winter except drink – with friends at home or in the thriving club scene. This convivial habit is practiced year round. There is no culture gap in our international crowd. The Americans

take to the local custom like fish to water and develop an immediate taste for local beer and brennivín.

I feel no small anxiety at the prospect of a week with this heavy-drinking crowd on this remote foreign island. It's as if they all belong to a club I can no longer join. My membership has expired and the renewal is too costly. My only fear is that once in their midst, my competitive drive will kick in and I'll want to drink them all under the table.

Light rain welcomes the wedding day. The tiny wood church, painted a soft grey, sits by itself in a churchyard lush with wildflowers.

Inside, the walls are painted a startling deep lavender, the white woodwork bright as clouds. Heida wears a traditional bridal costume: an open-weave homespun apron in soft browns and creams over an ankle length black skirt with a patterned belt wrapped tightly around her waist. Her black bodice is embellished with silver embroidery and filigreed closures. The tasseled end of a long black velvet cap lies draped over her shoulder. A perfect natural blush tinges her cheeks. She looks mythical, like a fairy tale maiden.

The reception is at the new senior center in Höfn, a nondescript boxy building overlooking the harbor. Everyone arrives at once and pushes into the small anteroom for cocktails. I have never seen so many blondes, strawberry blondes and redheads in one room.

I'm disoriented by the Icelandic being spoken all around me. The language sounds funny to my ear. It's full of pauses, errs, grinding starts and stops as if they're stumbling on their own words. To my right, I see my brother-in-law engrossed in conversation with an Icelandic couple. Farther into the room, my sister gesticulates as she talks, telling a funny story to an Icelandic man who leans in to hear her better. It seems like everyone but me is drinking and laughing. Without a drink in hand, I feel unarmed walking into the social fray.

Seating is unassigned at four long tables running the length of

the large main hall. I find myself sitting with Sigurjón's siblings from the eastern fjords.

Throughout the meal, members of Heida's family read toasts and tributes from the small stage. Between the toasts, the band plays songs and everybody puts down their forks and sings in Icelandic with gusto. Sigurjón's sister reaches over, opens a stapled packet of papers in front of me and points to number three. Oh! It's the lyrics! I flip ahead and see that a few songs have been included for the English-speakers: "My Darling, Clementine," "You Are My Sunshine," "Kumbaya" and the American favorite, "It's A Long Way to Tipperary."

After dinner, the bar moves into the dining hall closer to the drinkers. Half the long tables are carried out and the rest are shoved up against the walls. The band, which has barely taken a break, strikes up an eclectic set: waltzes, cha-cha, twist, disco and folk dances. A drunken Viking whirls me into a dance and pinches my rear. Heida flies breathlessly off the dance floor and pauses for a sip of beer. It's one in the morning and no darker than dusk outside.

I can't keep up with the manic, alcohol enhanced gaiety and leave at two for the guesthouse, the party still going full blast. When I left rehab, I stayed away from any place where drinks were being served. Now, I just avoid heavy-drinking events. I stay in on New Year's Eve, don't attend Super Bowl parties nor acknowledge St. Patrick's Day. I no longer fear that alcohol will recapture me, but worry that I will feel left out – and ultimately bored – as everyone else gets happier and louder and sillier.

The others arrive at the guesthouse several hours later, waking me from a light sleep with laughter, loud voices and much stomping around.

The older group returns to Reykjavík after the wedding, some to fly home to the States. The rest of us, seventeen siblings, cousins and friends are joining Ben and Heida on their honeymoon. The

plan is to drive roughly around the entire island in the next four days, staying overnight at campsites. We're jammed into two rented vans, towing our gear behind. Icelanders thrive on the outdoors and, Heida says, almost every town has a campsite with showers and toilets.

I'm not a camper, although I have been out in the woods once or twice. I have a flannel-lined slumber-party sleeping bag and I don't own a tent. Propane camping stoves require finicky adjustments that elude me. Dressing is tricky doubled over in a tent, and I'll be sharing one with my niece and nephew. Communal living will be a challenge.

We're camping tonight in the country's largest wooded area – a couple of acres of evergreen and birch on the shore of a long, narrow lake. We arrive, make camp, and pull out all the leftover wedding booze – scotch, vodka, gin, brandy, brennivín – for the cocktail hour. I'm feeling like odd man out, an old fuddy-duddy, cranky. After five days and a wedding in perpetual sunlight, I'm operating on a serious sleep debt.

I absent myself and find a mossy ledge on the far side of a promontory away from the campground. I'm twenty feet above the lake. Below, a small pebble beach curves around to a rocky point. The only sound is a gentle lapping of waves. The water is a milky turquoise. Across the lake, a smooth rise of farmland is backlit by the late evening light in patches of vivid green. Farmhouses, white with red roofs, are barely visible.

I live alone in Los Angeles and didn't realize how much I value my solitude. Even in a crowd, I stand a little apart, more comfortable observing than participating. I still don't know how to behave socially without a drink. My edges are rough and I feel like I snag and chafe when others get too close.

To me, people are chaos – they are the dangerous shoals, the latent volcanoes, the elements I can't trust for my safety. I hide

behind my camera, like I hid behind Scotch, recording what I'm reluctant to experience directly. I retreat, but in separating myself, I'm afraid I might miss the real joy of this trip.

En route to Lake Myvatn we stop at a geothermal field. We can smell it before we arrive. The ground is crusty with mineral deposits. Mud bubbles at the bottom of shallow craters and rock piles shoot sulfurous hot gas. The rocks are stained yellow, rusty orange, white and green. Stray off the marked path and a single step could break through the thin crust and release a scalding rush of steam.

Alcohol shielded me from my emotions, like a scab over a wound. When I tore the scab away the pain of old hurts erupted in an explosion of rage. I had insulated myself from feeling anything for so many years that encountering my own anger was terrifying. It was as if I'd entered a place overflowing with alien ferocity.

We drive north-west to Akureyri, Iceland's second largest city. Although only 60 miles south of the Arctic Circle, the weather is hot and sunny. I buy a picture book of Icelandic horses and wander down toward the edge of town. The pre-arranged meeting back at the vans is another hour or so away. I'm hungry and find an outdoor café for something to eat.

I'm flipping through my book, picking out the prettiest horses, when my youngest cousin, Lista, stops at my table.

"So, *here* you are!"

I look up, surprised. "Were you looking for me?"

"Kind-of. A bunch of us were going to get a beer, and you disappeared as soon as we got out of the van." She peers at me. "Actually, you've been keeping to yourself all week. It's almost like you don't want to be with us."

"Gee, I'm sorry. Of course I want to be here – this is a great trip." Lista seems appeased, but I'm bothered that my retreats have been noticed.

I used to live with the disquieting and distinct sense that I

didn't measure up to other people. I seemed to have an inability to form any kind of emotional attachment to anyone. It was as if I lacked some elemental function, like the ability to digest protein. In response, I felt a desperate need to be accepted and fit in, but I was so afraid of potential rejection that I simply withdrew. I'm learning how to compensate, but the feeling lingers like a cough after the flu.

On the final night of the wedding trip, we drive to Saudárkrókur, a fishing port on the shore of a northern fjord. The campground is undistinguished, sitting at the edge of town. The wind is picking up, clouds are rolling in and it looks like rain. I'm exhausted, chilly, and developing a sore throat that feels like a cold.

I go to bed shortly after dinner. I'm awakened by loud voices outside the tent. The light is so bright I think it's full morning, but my watch says 3 am. A man with an accent, two women and a couple of other men are arguing loudly. I can't make out the words and some seem to be Icelandic. I can't see anyone from the tent flap, but the voices are near. Just when the altercation seems to abate, the voices rise in intensity and volume. I begin to worry that someone will be hurt, but I'm warm and snug and fall back to sleep.

It's well past nine o'clock in the morning. I finished breakfast an hour ago and the late-night group is just beginning to stir. Slowly, they emerge from the tents, moving with groggy care, eyes not fully open, hair sticking up at odd angles. Kim mumbles something about Bruce being so drunk that Ben had to carry his friend into the tent and the story begins to unfold.

After dinner, a group had walked into town to drink at the local bar. Lista and her cousin, Lee, flirted with two local men, who followed them back to camp after the bar closed. The party continued, fueled with the last of the wedding liquor. The Icelanders became upset when asked to leave – they were expecting to spend the night. Ben and his friends rushed over to help the girls, and the shouting started.

Lee is passed out in a toilet stall where she spent the night. Two of the men drag Lista, still in her bag, out of her tent. I glance over later to see if she's moved. A lanky blonde man I don't know bends over and peers intently at her face, as if waiting to finish a conversation. Heida approaches and asks him to leave. He scowls, mutters something in Icelandic and walks away. Lista remains half-comatose on the ground.

I roll my bag and stow the tent in the trailer in a burst of energy. I hum, "It's a Long Way to Tipperary." I find the light drizzle refreshing. The skies begin to clear across the fjord to the coastal range. A mist hangs low between black peaks as the storm clouds lift. Snow-tipped mountains are knife sharp against the brightening sky.

Arlene Naganawa

S h e D e a l s

slipping the knave
from her sleeve.

He conjures a rabbit
in white-gloved air.

This dream, they whisper,
has a trapdoor.

Many tricks,
old and enticing.

Here, you can cut a life in two—
She fans open

his knife bouquet.
--or mend it.

Egg and Sperm

I.

Choosing Sperm Is Not a Decision

to be taken lightly, but the pleasure
of imagining was almost as fine
as falling darkly into love.

For weeks, I floated, having chosen,
felt the child between us,
golden infant waiting to be drawn

into the world. Father-of-my-child,
I draped a rose silk scarf over my bare
shoulders for you, touched perfume

inside my wrists. At night
I pointed out the stars' slow circling
above my head.

When I learned your file had been closed,
your gift withdrawn, I was stunned
by my grief

true as a silent phone,
finding a warm robe, months later,
folded in a drawer.

Donor

Was it money or the sense
of tossing sand into the air,
puffs of dandelion, landing
where they may? My blood
is good, my heart fills
a room when I enter.
Why not my children,
grains of rice
of stalks of golden wheat?
Wind shuffles through
the fields, rain falls,
pools form in footprints
in the earth and on
the city street.

Soon

The dogs lie against a concrete wall,
soaking up heat. Spikes of horsetail
push through the driveway gravel.
For almost nine months I have waited,
listening to the heart beat inside me
and the heart inside that. A jet soars
over my head. Later I will move

to the country where shadows
of pine trees line the roads, so dark
I will have to travel by instinct.

At night I lie under the sheet,
wait for the baby's kick,
wings at first, then punches.

II.

Not Knowing Half Your Self

is like looking for the new moon:
who can trace a seam in black silk?

I look at my hand: what pattern?

Some days I lie flat in the tub,
wondering, am I natural?

How Does It Feel to Fall in Love

with someone who is just cells and language?

Was It Theft?

My mother took a heartbeat
and gave it hibiscus, a name, a journey.

At the Great Wall and among crowds
of black-haired children, I pretend

to see his shadow, an angle of elbow
or light streaking like a crazy
thought across a door.

Sometimes I conjure—
he's a doctor he has a son and a wife.
On Christmas Eve, face bathed
in red, he prays in a cathedral.
On warm days he walks briskly
down a Hong Kong street in a fine Italian suit.

My father races a bicycle in the Midwest,
wears a magenta jersey, his long hair
flowing behind him.

But in the fall he betrays us,
sweeps his lovely wife his child
to the fair, buys popcorn, rides the carousel,
blur of mirrors and furious horses.

Creation

At school, I sculpt.
I made a model of a dog
we'd rescued from the pound,
a "worst of" hound, shy mongrel.
I worried over the turn of the feet

and curve of the haunch, molding
and shaping over and over.
The clay dog never resembled
the living thing, did not evoke
the damp smell or whisper.

I make blind contours of my face
from photos, from the mirror,
looking under and over, inking
lines over lines.

Sometimes in the Dark

my head hurts. He is not there
with an aspirin and a glass of water.

M e l a n i e H u b b a r d

A day for difficult pistachios: it rained.

The sunfish head stood
on the plate. I pressed my nose against the screen, dislodging

some dust-alphabet pronounced by those who
sneeze, and stared at the kumquat tree in frequent

bloom.

You're busy clasping and unclasping tongue
and teeth, bearing down on the suspected cavity to see

might it be a *little* soft? She turns to say
in sign, the casserole is not quite done.

Rookery

Rookery in my heart, all its little pieces
like birds in their rooks. Holes in little
jagged cliffs. Rooks like little piercing
in a sieve, a strainer for the stars.

Stars that swarm and twirl — stars
that float up from the sea
like frigate birds leaping
from the cliffs out into the bright
blue air, making wheels
and then darting down
as if to catch the seam
at its frothy hem.

If they could tug up
the waves' skirt, what
would we see?

Oh tender heart, we'd see
the earth all the way round
to its end and how
she isn't smooth, but jagged
and rough — worn.

We'd discover that only her surface
appears curved and taut — her blue-green dome
reflecting that blue-green heaven-weave. Look, look —
even her mirror's caught and shimmer-split
like torn blue cloth. Beautiful, isn't it?

A p a n t o m a n c y

(Divination through interpreting any objects [or beings] that happen to appear by chance)

All winter, a sewing machine whirled
inside a belly. All winter, the click
click click of needles on glass,

the pine layered in ice, bright note
of a blue jay sewn through stiff air,
a clean noun asleep within a snow bank.

All winter, stitches stuttering over skin
fed to one long, lean tooth -- a body nursed
by a spindle, an embroidery itself.

All winter, the click click click of seeds
splitting, spoonfuls of babies unfolding
within a pocket, a veil between the slumber

and the briar. Mouth to mouth in darkness,
a tender marsh of blue. Mouth to mouth
in sunshine, a calculus of thistles in a mayfield.

Change of Plans

I have a summer gig working on the pipeline maintenance crew at Susquehanna Gas. The crew is made up of seven guys, four full-time guys, and three summer guys including myself. One of the full-time guys is Ethan. He's an older guy, in his sixties, just playing out the string. Ethan doesn't do much, he works his farm when he's not on the job, and naps as much as he can when he is. There's also Wyatt, he's wiry, lives on black coffee, and talks endlessly about whatever pops into his head regardless of whether it's accurate or not.

"Now I don't think that you boys quite appreciate the benefits of black coffee," Wyatt says one day.

"Is that right," Ethan says, "illuminate us."

"First off, if you drink black coffee all day, it keeps you sharp, so you don't need as much sleep, and you can get more done. Second, it dehydrates you, so while you don't have to waste as much time taking a piss, it still ensures regular bowel movements. And finally, when you drink black coffee, it fills you up and you don't feel like snacking as much, the result, no wasted calories."

"Wasted calories," Ethan says, "Jesus, shut the hell up."

We also have Boone, a handsome guy who has a house he's forever working on, and a young wife; Jones, who is dark haired, and doesn't quite know how to get along with the rest of the crew; and the other two summer guys, Lonny and Ricky, who are brothers. Lonny is a former college baseball player, who finds himself getting thicker with each day that passes, and Ricky is taller, thinner, three years his junior, and a star high school basketball player.

The guys all like to joke around, and they all like to talk a lot of shit.

"The wife is just losing interest in me you know, she's caught up in grandchildren, and other things, I may just need to move on, I got needs you know," Ethan says with a wink.

"Maybe you could trade her in for a new one," Wyatt says, "like you did with that old tractor of yours."

"Or, maybe you could find yourself a little something on the side, like a farmer's daughter," Boone says.

All the guys laugh at these comments, even Ethan.

"Maybe you could fuck one of your goats?" Jones says.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Boone says.

We are asked to be at work by 8:30am, and most every day follows the same pattern: we read the paper, we get our coffee and then we sit around the table in the break room dividing up that day's work assignments. From there we pack up the trucks around 9:30am, go out to breakfast, and then get to the site around 11:00am, where we work for an hour or so, one day cleaning brush, another day surveying, stop for an hour lunch break, maybe follow that with a quick nap, work for another hour or so, take a coffee break, read the paper, and then head back to the shop to check in before closing down for the day so we can head home by 4:30pm.

On this day, Boone asks Lonny, Ricky, and myself to join him on a job because he needs help cutting back some brush that's up on a hill that the pipeline passes over. The four of us pile into one of the trucks and Boone immediately starts in on where we should stop for breakfast.

"We could go to Ida's," Boone says, "but the coffee sucks there. Danny's Diner is good, but it's kind of out of the way. I like the omelets at the Pegasus, but not as much as the Western omelet at Danny's. Oh fuck it, Danny's it is."

"So, I have a story for you guys," Lonny says.

"Yeah," I say, "what?"

"I slept with my neighbor last night," Lonny says.

"No shit," I say, "and?"

"She's older you know," Lonny says.

"Yeah, and so what?" I say.

"Well, it's different," Lonny says, "you ever sleep with an older woman?"

"No," I say, "what's so different about it?"

"She was softer, you know, it didn't feel right," Lonny says, "I didn't like it."

"Welcome to my world," Boone says laughing, "so, let me guess, she's married, and her husband travels a lot for work, right?"

"Yeah," Lonny says, "pretty much, how did you know?"

"An older woman banging a jerk-off like you, she's got to be married and lonely," Boone says.

"I hear that," Ricky says, "and what about your wife Boone, does she ever bang any younger guys?"

"I don't know," Boone says, "but if I caught her with another guy, I'd kill her."

"Just like that?" I say.

"Just like that, motherfucker," Boone says.

We arrive at Danny's moments later, and after eating Western omelets, driving to the site, cutting down some bushes, eating lunch, taking naps, cutting down a few more bushes, and heading back to the office, Boone asks me to help him out with a project he's working on at his house. I say sure and we go and grab one of the dump trucks from the parking lot.

We head to the quarry where Boone picks up a load of rocks. "I'm building a patio in my back yard," Boone says, "and I want to lay down some rocks before I pour the concrete." After leaving the quarry we head to Boone's house where he proceeds to dump the rocks in a big pile in his backyard. Boone asks me to start shoveling the rocks into the area he's dug out for the patio and we spend the next 30 minutes shoveling and raking. When we're done we sit down in Boone's lawn chairs and he yells, "hey, honey, could you bring us

some beers?”

Boone's wife Kristy walks out of the house carrying a couple of beers and wearing a pair of cut-off jean shorts.

“Thanks baby,” Boone says, “this here is one of the boys from work.”

Kristy smiles at me and hands me a beer. She has the most beautiful green eyes you've ever seen.

“How are you doing?” she says.

“Fine thanks,” I say, I just may be in love.

“When will you be back home,” Kristy says to Boone.

“I'll probably stop off at Thirsty's for some beers after I return the bulldozer,” Boone says, “so I guess some time after that.”

“Okay then, just don't get home too late, I want to talk to you about something,” Kristy says.

“All right baby, no problem, don't go getting your panties all bunched up,” Boone says.

Kristy walks away.

“She seems nice,” I say,

“Yeah, whatever, kid,” Boone says, “just take my advice though, there's a lot of women out there, and the best thing you can do is avoid getting married as long as possible, got it?”

“Sure man,” I say.

Boone doesn't respond, but then laughs and mumbles to himself “she wants to talk to me about something, are you fucking kidding me.”

After we drop off the dump truck, Boone, Ricky, and I head to Thirsty's and grab a pitcher of Bud Light. Thirsty's is always dark, always damp, and always smells of stale beer. It is Boone's favorite place to hang out.

“Talking lizards selling beer,” Boone says, “it isn't right.”

“No it isn't,” I say, “but what would you prefer?”

“Are you fucking kidding,” Boone says, “give me a girl in a

bikini, right Ricky?"

"Fuck yeah, maybe even that one over there," Ricky says pointing to a blonde woman in a white, ribbed tank-top that says, "lick me."

"Now, she's not bad at all," Boone says with a funny little smile spreading across his face.

As if on cue the girl walks over and puts her arms around his neck. Boone smiles again and they start to kiss. Boone then slaps two twenty-dollar bills on the table and says, "enjoy yourself boys, and if the wife comes by you didn't see me."

And so we drink. Tequila shots. Jack and Gingers. Jägermeister. And more Bud Light.

"So, you ever fuck a sister," Ricky says.

"No man," I say, "I haven't, why?"

"Why, have you ever seen a sister dance?" Ricky says.

"Yeah," I say.

"Then you know why," Ricky says, "just picture them in bed."

"I'll drink to that," I say.

And so we do. Soon the bar is a lot more blurry, the glasses in front of us fuzzy at the edges, the light refracting off them spellbinding. I hold onto the table for balance and start plotting my escape. Ricky lays his head down on the table and as he sleeps I try to decide whether I should just leave him in the bar.

I look towards the door and see Boone's wife Kristy come in. She's wearing a little black skirt and t-shirt. Her hair is teased out. She looks amazing.

"Hey," she says, "have you seen Boone, I thought he was supposed to be here?"

I cannot speak. I am transfixed by her eyes, her glowing green eyes.

"Hey," she says again, though more loudly, "I'm talking to you, you seen Boone?"

She then lightly taps me on the cheek with her hand.

Snapping out of my reverie I say, "No, I haven't seen him, I've just been hanging out with Ricky here."

"Right," she says, "look, I know he's messing around, but you know what, fuck him, you guys need a ride home?"

"Sure," I say.

We pile Ricky into the backseat of Kristy's car and drop him off at his house. Kristy then proceeds to drive up Pennsylvania Avenue, veering off onto Morgan Road, past Ross Park Zoo, before continuing on until we reach Mill Hill, a stretch of empty road just down from the tennis center.

About halfway down the road Kristy pulls over and kills the lights. It's dark up here and desolate. No housing, no cars, no streetlights, or trees, just the top of a hill and a whole lot of nothing going on forever.

"You've been staring at me, haven't you?" Kristy says.

"Me, no, you're Boone's wife," I say, "I wouldn't do that."

"Sure," she says, "of course not, so, you ever do it with a married woman?"

"No," I say, "to be honest I haven't really done it with anyone."

"Is that right," she says.

Kristy reaches over and undoes my belt and fly. I lean back to slide off my jeans and as I do Kristy reaches down and slips off her panties. She pauses for a moment before pulling me on top of her. My hands start to roam everywhere, her back, her hips, her incredible legs, and breasts, and I don't know what the fuck Lonny's talking about, because she's not soft at all. I don't last long, and I don't have any idea what to say or do.

Kristy smiles and pulls her panties back on. She pulls away without saying a word and heads back down the hill and towards my house. We drive back past the zoo, the Knights of Columbus Lodge, and the candy store we always called Hershey's because of the old,

rusted blue and white Hershey's Ice Cream sign hanging over the door.

Kristy pulls up in front of my house and kisses me on the cheek.

"Tomorrow night is Boone's poker game," she says, "it will definitely go late, so why don't you plan to come by around 10:00pm or so."

"I don't think that's such a good idea," I say.

"Don't think so much," she says.

But I do think about her all night, the way her skirt looked when she first walked into Thirsty's, the way her panties looked bunched up around her ankles, and those eyes, those amazing green eyes I would only be too happy to lose myself in maybe just one more time.

The next day at work I try to avoid Boone and end up going out with Wyatt for the day. As we drive about and he rambles on about the Kennedy assassination, all I can think about is Kristy. I imagine climbing on top of her again and again, and fantasize about all the things she might let me do to her naked body later that night.

Long after the workday ends and shortly after I'm sure my parents have gone off to sleep, I slip out of the house and drive over to Boone's. I park a couple of blocks away, and like a burglar preparing for a big job I silently make my way through the neighborhood.

When I get to Boone's house he is sitting there on the front stairs, sweaty and smiling, slightly out of breath, a baseball bat lying across his lap. The bat looks slick, like it's covered with blood, though who's to say it isn't just the shadows playing tricks on me. I freeze as Boone stares at me for a moment, letting me dangle there out in the cold night air.

"Hey man," he says, "change of plans, Kristy isn't able to meet up with you tonight."

“Is that right,” I say, “maybe I’ll just head home then.”

“No, I don’t think so,” he says, “I need your help with a little project, I’d like to finish that back patio tonight.”

“Jeez Boone, I don’t know man,” I say, “it’s so late, why don’t we just wait until tomorrow, and I’ll help you then.”

“Why put off until tomorrow what you can do today,” he says, “and anyway I want to pour the concrete right now, I don’t need anyone poking around with those rocks, you know.”

“Sure,” I say, “of course not.”

We head out back to pour the concrete. I stare long and hard at the pit laying there before us. And I keep staring at it until it’s completely covered and our work is done.

S u s a n G r i m m

J a n u a r y I n s t r u c t i o n

Opening my eyes from interior black, the light
getting stronger in the sky—that's a good

thing—all the doors and windows that can
open, even the refrigerator with its 10 watt

shine, the milk brightening the coffee,
the book opening to a white page. But then,

there's the January instruction: icicles pointing
the wrong way, snow filling the yard, white

at the roots of my hair, new growth
an indication that each day we assemble

the egg so that it can be broken again.
Vanished linens. Waning moon or new?

At the coldest, our breath puffing out white.

Dream Time

I.

Awake

Awake, it can always be you I am thinking
of, your name hunkered on my tongue waiting
to hop out with my wanting, the messenger

sent flying to make you turn. Bob—name wanting
to call to itself, leap out of my mouth,
bounce, roll on the wheels of its consonants.

Things that reach, things that hold—are these
contradictions? In the dream there was water,
the idea of movement, the car accelerating

as the bridge went down, entering the waters
over and over. We had already jumped out,
making separate spaces of desire, here, here,

here. Don't say who else was in the car.
Not fringed pool but saucer of the retina,
the mixed muddy colors of your reflection,

projection getting larger and larger. Why
do we close our eyes? The eyelashes brush,
brush like the faintest camel hair. Clothes

strewn about in their own attitudes
of abandon or despair like the ghostly posings
at poltergeist homes—can a dress love

or be loved? Crisp infinitesimal grind
of the threads like the rasp of your beard
on the heel of my hand. When I tilt with desire

that dream might fall out. Our legs enjamb.
The causeway, climbing over the seat,
standing on the brake but unable to stop,

the bed like a canvas or page blurred
by the repeated dimensional presence of you.

II.

Lost Perspective

If I am standing at the window, behind me
on the bed we have almost finished
sweeping west to east, like a voluptuous
cumulus run, huge, white, supple as the sun.
Outside just the weather and the street, not
how it sometimes seems, a corridor of windows
arching into the future, similar frames
rammed into interior past, a delicate glassy
spine. Flashes of that winter kitchen window
black—early when I know light will come
up behind the trees and something will be
beautiful for a minute. Drinking in the green

of the plants another year, the smack of the light
and the snap of the shades letting me live.

III.

Susurratation

There's no problem with omniscience in this dream.
I'm inside my own head and on the sand,

Bob one step up in the trees, their straight
trunks still growing with high indeterminate

leaves. At schoolroom map-side left, the ocean
is already immeasurably large. There's no room

for the jerk and splatter of limbs like other
dreams—of naked classroom stress or cold lost

childhood returns. The white hiss of the mist
fills me up—the sound of the white cottony

light, smooth buffed down twinkle of air,
trembling points of water that will never fall.

IV.

Digression: Ode to Spiritual Failure

The thick hard twist of your wrist and arm
like a lion's paw—I pause with you

in the pavilion of desire. Leaving a ghost
trail, my tongue illustrates how love

is a dream, dense and repeatable, a luxury
of trial and test, a luster ungluing us

in our undergrowths. Young, young, we float
at once massy and light. No flotilla for me,

dreamboat, just the steady surge, the verge,
your blue hunting eye, and warm breath.

V.

In Situ

Love—a chart of this word litters the page; aloft
on a litter of love, asway on the shoulders of oil-
muscled men; parts of me shake in the nicest way.

The moment when you kneel, lie down—do I want
to know what you think? My eyes drill little tunnels
of attention, concentration resolved by the dark

background. If a train leaves London at 10:26,
the ride is smooth, fast, a brief rain as the land
tips up. There is no time to lie down in the sweet

meat of the darkness, in the bowels of the déjà vu
worm. Inevitable, uncertain glow worm; beautiful
possible lacing of slime. Not thinking is key. When

the trolley comes by, a tiny cup of flavorful coffee,
perhaps a sweet or a crisp. Love, dream, drama,
arrival. Is this too simple? I am training for the end

of the tunnel where everyone speaks French. Papers
fill my room with light. Lips are compelled
by tiny jets of desire: a long stutter of kisses

and greetings, a throaty train of delighted vowels.

Valhalla

I was sitting in my lawn chair on the balcony outside my motel room when Cherry Jackson came around the corner, like she did about this time every day. Cherry's room was directly opposite mine on the west side of the motel, and the west side of anything is no place to be on a summer afternoon in Little Rock. Usually she'd be carrying her own lawn chair and dressed in short-shorts and halter top, driving me a little crazy, yeah, but today she was lawn-chairless and had on a white apron over green hospital scrubs.

I looked her up and down like I appreciated what I saw—which I did, but not because of the clothes.

"Far out," I said. Yeah, OK, *far out*, me and John Denver. I'll admit it, I'd kind of like to be a refugee from the '60's, one of those real comfortable guys with long hair and army fatigue shirts and a lot of wrinkles because they've seen it all and everything's cool, they're mellow with it. Problem is I was born in '71, and the clothes and long hair alone don't quite make it. Mellow, though, I'm working on that.

"Where'd you get the scrubs?" I said.

"Over at the hospital. Found a whole pile of them in a laundry tub."

She meant the University Medical Center a couple of blocks up Markham. I go over there every few weeks and take myself on a tour, real interesting, and Cherry is right: you could walk out with all kinds of stuff if you wanted to. But I don't like to be encumbered by a lot of material possessions, so the only thing I ever took was a

diploma off some doctor's office wall. The diploma itself didn't interest me, but the frame was a perfect fit for this photo of Stevie Ray Vaughan I cut out of *Rolling Stone*. Stevie Ray's up there on my motel room wall right now beside the *Apocalypse Now* poster.

"What about the apron?" I asked. "Get that from the hospital, too?"

"No, that's mine. . . . What's that look for? You don't think I ever cooked? I used to be domestic as shit."

She drummed her fingers on the balcony railing, which earlier this summer they repainted a sky blue. Very pleasant color. They do their best at the motel. I've got no complaints. According to Mr. Jimmy it used to be a Regal 8, but now it's called Valhalla Motel. Valhalla has something to do with the Vikings, their happy hunting grounds or something. I walked over to the branch library on H Street once to look it up, but it's so cool and quiet in there that I sat down in one of those big leather chairs and *bingo*, went right to sleep, and when I woke up I forgot why I'd come. That happens to me a lot. I blame it on the medication.

"So, what's up?" I said.

Without looking at me, her fingernails now *clickety-clicking* on the rail, she said, "I got to go see the warden."

"What warden?"

"Cummins Unit."

Cummins, that's the main prison in Arkansas, south of Pine Bluff. You don't want to go there.

"Why do you want to see the warden at Cummins?"

"Gotta get my man out of jail."

That would be Nathan, I guess. He was living with Cherry when I first moved in to the Valhalla, before the law came and took him away. I'm not sure what for. Could have been any number of things.

"Why do you want to get him out?"

She gave me a look.

"Because he's my *man*. My husband."

"Bullshit."

Her eyes flared.

"If I had my knife in my hand right now I'd cut you."

Cherry and I get along great, but she's got a temper. Besides, she works real late and doesn't get good and woke up until sundown usually, so she can be a touch cranky this time of day.

"OK, OK, he's your husband," I said. "What's the get-up have to do with all this, though?"

"I told you, this is for the warden. You know, image. Everything image in today's world. The image I'm trying to create here is, you know, a working woman that needs her man."

At "working woman" I covered my mouth, but too late.

"Laugh, mother fuck! I swear now I'm getting my knife!"

She took a step toward me, and I was trying to decide if I should make my escape via a one-and-a-half off the balcony when, instead of going for my eyes, she started to explain. *Explain*. Nobody bothers with that much around the Valhalla.

"Look, Harry," she began. (Yeah, *Harry*. Can you imagine the kidding I used to get in my school days? But, know any other guys named Harry? Of course not. Hey, I'm one of a kind.) She went on to explain that she wanted the warden to see her as a woman who cooked and cleaned, held down a job, just a regular ordinary woman who needed to have her man beside her, not some "flash bitch"—her words. In fact, she had it toned down for the occasion, not just the scrubs and apron, but sneakers instead of stiletto high heels, and lilac eye-shadow and lipstick instead of her usual gold eye-shadow and cherry-red lipstick so moist it looked like it's ready to run down her chin, and how I longed to lick it off. But, hey, we're just friends.

"Why are you so anxious to get him out of the slammer?"

She gave me a look like I was slow and getting slower.

“Because I miss him, Harry. It’s been five damn years.”

She missed him. Just what I wanted to hear. OK, I’ll admit it, I wouldn’t mind being more than just friends with Cherry. I mean, she’s a terrific looking woman with these incredibly long legs that go all the way to the ground, and the most beautiful satiny brown skin without a blemish anywhere I’ve ever seen, and she’s funny and sassy, full of spit and vinegar like my daddy would say, and she comes around and talks to me every day, took to me right off, in fact, which is a thing that hasn’t happened to me a lot in my life. I’m not sure why we couldn’t be more than friends. I could pay her some each month if that’s what she wanted, and if she wanted to she could go on working. I’m not the jealous type. But, I dunno, I think if I asked her something along those lines she’d laugh herself sick, and that pisses me off.

Maybe that was the reason, me getting my feelings hurt over a question I never asked and she never answered, that I said kind of sarcastic-like, “So, you really think that get-up’s going to make any difference with the warden?”

But then I immediately felt bad when she said, “You never know. Where there’s hope there’s life,” real bright and optimistic like a schoolgirl. It’s not my goal to go around stamping out optimism. Got a whole world out there to do that for you. So to cheer her along I said, “You might be right. After all, I mean, he agreed to see you, which is farther than I thought you’d get.”

“Huh? The warden? He ain’t agreed to nothing. He don’t know I’m coming.”

“You mean you don’t have an appointment to see him?”

She looked troubled at that.

“No. You mean I should have?”

Cherry reads *Reader’s Digest* and brags about watching PBS, but, really, sometimes she’s as dumb as a sack of rocks.

“You think you can just waltz in off the street and see the warden?”

“Figured I had a better chance than writing him a damn letter. Write a damn letter just give him a chance to say no without having to look me in my eye. Besides, I don’t have no appointment when I go down to visit Nathan.”

“I didn’t know you’d ever been to visit Nathan.”

“Sure. I go down every couple of months.”

“Every couple of months. Wow, you sure must miss him a hell of a lot.”

“What do you know about it? He won’t let me come no more than that. He don’t want me to come at all. Say it hurt him too much to see me, to see me go away and know that he can’t go with me. And then the parole board go and turn him down again last week . . .”

I looked down at the parking lot, across the street at some old abandoned house. Great view. Cherry said some more stuff, but I didn’t say anything or look at her. I pretended like she wasn’t there, and then in a minute, she wasn’t.

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I suppose a lot of people would say the Valhalla is a real dump, the end of the road, but I figure wherever you are now is the end of whatever road you’ve been on. Oh sure, there are whores and pimps and pushers and people missing some relevant parts here, but they’re in the world just like you and me, and they have to live somewhere. What counts is we all get along pretty well together, except for some occasional hard feelings that have, OK, lead to bloodshed, but I’ve steered clear of that, so the Valhalla is OK by me, and it’s not like I don’t have anything to compare it to. I’ve seen some of the world.

I started out right here in Little Rock, went to McClellan High, class of ‘89. I liked the meals in the cafeteria, and I liked to go to the

football games and watch the cheerleaders. But my senior year I had this English teacher that kept calling on me in class, so I dropped out of school. Working for a living didn't appeal to me a whole lot, though, so I joined the army. Strange for a hippie-wannabe, huh? But that was later. I spent some time in Missouri and Louisiana in places good for nothing except army posts, then I was off to Germany, eventually wound up in the Desert Storm thing. I saw myself going crazy, winning a lot of medals, you know, the Southern boy thing, me and Sergeant York. But a week before the real stuff started, I jumped off a deuce-and-a-half, landed wrong, and felt my back go. Ruptured disks and stuff. I spent months in a hospital stateside, then got discharged.

I don't know, things might have been different for me if I'd been able to stay in the army, but I'm not complaining. For the most part, life has been good to me and seems like it's always threatening to get better. Like, I get out of the army and live off unemployment a year or two, and you can't beat that, hey? But then the unemployment runs out and I get a job working at Timex, a dumb move because I can't stand up a full shift on account of my back, but then the VA re-evaluates me and puts me in a nursing home here in Little Rock for therapy, and I really liked that nursing home, so, see, when things seem to be the darkest all of a sudden here comes a silver lining.

That nursing home was cool. Even with my back, I was better off than damn near everybody there, including most of the staff. The average age was about eighty, and everybody treated me like their grandkid. I guess to be technical about it I had grandparents at some point, but you couldn't prove it by me. Now I had a hundred of them. I'd push them around in wheelchairs, when my back wasn't acting up, and play bingo with them, and at meals I wouldn't sit with the two or three other people my age—real geeks, really messed up—but I'd sit at a different table of old folks each meal,

spread the joy around. It would have been fine with me if I'd stayed there forever, but after a couple of months the therapist said she'd done all she could for me. Adios, amigo.

Another person might really be down at that point, having to leave a place they thought of as home and start all over again, but not me. I always manage to land on my feet. Sure enough, I wind up at the Valhalla on full disability, hell, don't have to worry about a job or a roof over my head or three squares. I don't care what anybody else says, it's a damn good life.

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I don't have a woman, of course, no wife or steady girl or anything like that. There was this girl in high school I almost asked out once. I had the phone in my hand ready to dial, but I had butterflies in my stomach so bad the phone was shaking in my hand and I felt myself breaking out in a cold sweat, so I said fuck this and hung up. But that's OK, now I've got Cherry Jackson. It's possible some sort of deal may work out there. But I'm not going to rush things. I'm still a young man. I've got my whole life ahead of me.

The reason I think I have a shot at Cherry is, let's face it, she doesn't have a lot of options. She's not coming back from the Cummins Unit with Nathan, we all know that. You can't lose hope in life, but you have to pick and choose what you hope for or you can come out looking like a damn fool.

Cherry's going to come back from Cummins feeling like a damn fool, and I'll be here for her. It'll be either me or Mr. Jimmy, and if I don't win that one, I really am a sorry son of a bitch.

Mr. Jimmy took over from Nathan as Cherry's "business manager." I'm not sure how that works, why that's necessary. If Cherry needs somebody to take care of her earnings, I'd do that for her for free. Mr. Jimmy takes his cut, you can bet on that. What

does he provide in return, that's what I can't figure. Protection? Nathan, now, he was a tall, wiry black man, nothing but muscle and bone with a scar running straight across his right cheek like it was drawn with a ruler and his right earlobe missing. You'd take one look at Nathan and know that you weren't going to give him or his women any shit. But Mr. Jimmy, hell, he's this old white fart, must be fifty, lives down on the ground floor, tall but skinny, stooped, narrow yellow smoker's face and little bitty eyes shooting around constantly like he has to keep an eye on everything all at once because none of it can be trusted. You always smell alcohol on him and he can't say three words without coughing, smoker's hack. I don't smoke tobacco and don't drink unless somebody offers me something and then it's just to be polite. So what's Mr. Jimmy got to offer than I don't got?

He carries a knife and gun. I've seen them both. The gun is one of those snub-nose revolvers. He carries it in a little holster on his left side under his Hawaiian shirt. That's all he ever wears, winter and summer, Hawaiian shirts. Wears a little straw hat, too, with a feather in the band. You go over to the tracks in Hot Springs, you'll see a lot of guys dressed just like him studying the racing forms.

I only saw the gun once, when he stretched up to change a light-bulb on the wall outside his room. "You gotta be able to see 'em coming," he said, his eyes going left and right. I've seen the knife any number of times, although I can't remember any specific occasion. It's like every so often Mr. Jimmy just feels the need to let people know he's got it.

Guns, now, I don't have any involvement with guns, although I think if it hadn't been for my back problem I could have killed a lot of people in the army, won a bunch of medals. Who knows, I might have won the Congressional Medal of Honor. You win that, they give you about a hundred thousand a year for life. I would really have been set then. Cherry and I could have moved out of this dump

and lived someplace decent.

I do carry a knife, though, a Barlow. Had it since I was a kid. It's good and sharp, you bet. My daddy taught me how to use a whetstone, a real art. My mother died when I was just a little guy. I was there when it happened. We were walking down to the store on Chicot Road. Chicot's a blacktop, narrow, almost no shoulder. She would hold my hand, and when a car came along she'd lead me down into the ditch while she walked on the far edge of the road. All of a sudden, my hand wasn't in my mother's any more. She was flying up in the air and then came down on the roof of the pickup that'd hit her and then her body bounced off into the ditch. I didn't have a scratch on me except my left hand hurt from being so empty. That was a bad thing, but I got over it. Hey, either you do or you don't. You don't get any other options.

My daddy did his best with me, I guess. He was a sort of woodsman. We lived on the very southern edge of Little Rock. You could walk five minutes down Chicot Road and there'd be the woods. When we had meat it was generally something he'd shot. Deer, rabbit, coon, squirrel. He said he'd take me hunting with him, but I wouldn't go. I didn't like that look in his eye. I'm not saying he would have done anything, but Mama's death seemed to affect him a lot more than it did me, and you don't take a chance when somebody looks at you like that. Anyway, that's why I can hone a knife but never shot a gun until I got in the army. Maybe that hunter's blood of my father's would have come out in me if I'd made it to the actual shooting days of Desert Storm, but you can't be sure of a thing like that. In fact, it's kind of funny, but right before I jumped off that deuce-and-a-half I said to myself, *I'm going to land wrong, I'm going to mess up my back*. Weird, huh? You could say it cost me a chance at a Congressional Medal of Honor, but who knows? A lot of guys came back real messed up, and some didn't come back at all. I could have been one of them.

I take things as they come, and all in all things have worked out damn good for me. I mean, Cherry and all.

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I got a hamburger at Waffle House, then took up my post again on the balcony. It was almost dark when I saw Cherry climbing out of a taxi.

I called down to her from the balcony, "Hey, girl! You take a taxi all the way to Cummins and back? How you afford that?"

"How you think?" she said without looking up at me. "Pay on the way there, pay on the way back."

She disappeared into the stairwell on the north end of the building. I heard the *clang clang* of her coming up the metal stairs, held my breath as I waited to see if she'd come around to my side or go the other way to hers. Hers.

I went back into my room and slammed the door and threw my lawn chair across the room. It took out a chunk of plaster under Stevie Ray, but, hell, if that's the worst you do at the Valhalla, you're a model resident. Which is one reason I like it here: their standards aren't real high.

I lay on the bed awhile, waiting for Cherry to come around and talk to me, then I went back out on the balcony and sat on the walkway with my feet hanging down and my arms draped over the balcony railing, waiting, which was silly because it was hot out and besides, if Cherry was going to come it wouldn't make any difference if I was outside or in. She'd come on into my room without knocking or anything. If I was in the bathroom, she'd bang on the bathroom door and say, "Hey, whatch y'all doing in there?" and then laugh like a little girl would laugh, like she was delighted with herself.

She didn't come around to talk to me.

I sat on the concrete until my butt went numb and my legs went to sleep hanging down, then I went back into the motel room and took some pills.

I lay on the bed and looked at the TV until eleven, then took the lawn chair back to the balcony. Eleven o'clock, thereabouts, is when Cherry starts work.

Nicollete and LaShawndra were already out. LaShawndra looks fine from a distance, but up close she looks like what she is: a druggie. The only thing Nicollete has going for her is she's white. Both of them together don't hold a candle to Cherry.

It was almost 11:30 before Cherry came out. I could tell by the way she walked that she was tired, sad. The Nathan business, I guess.

She's never said it in so many words, but Cherry doesn't like me to watch her on the job. Usually I don't want to, either, but tonight, I don't know, I guess I was in a contrary mood.

There's not much to it. They walk up and down Yew Street because standing in one spot in high heels is hard on the ankles. The old street lamp thing is basically true because, well, you've got to be seen, so they mostly walk around in the circle of light cast by the street lamps, each girl on her section of Yew until a car stops, then, business time. They'll go with a John in his car around the corner and park on a side street, or take him back to their room, depending on what the deal is. Not very exciting, but a job's a job, I guess. Who am I to judge?

I must have fallen asleep. I blame it on that, being groggy when I came awake all at once and there it was going on below me and I sat there watching like I was watching a television show, unable to move while the two guys had her, Cherry, one on each arm pulling her in opposite directions I thought at first but no, they were pulling her toward the open door of a pickup.

God, was she magnificent, Cherry, six-foot tall, fighting like an Amazon queen and these two Arky rednecks with their long greasy

hair and tattoos could hardly budge her. It seemed like it took ten minutes. It seemed like they were just standing there, posing. But then this third guy jumped out of the pickup and hit Cherry in the face—I heard it; it sounded like a ripe cantaloupe fell off a table—and she went limp.

They pulled her into the pickup. You wouldn't think there'd be room for all four in there. When they slammed the door one of Cherry's legs was dangling out the window. As soon as they started off down the street, the leg started jerking up and down and at the same time there was a scream so loud it didn't seem to come from a human being.

That's when I saw him, Mr. Jimmy, running out into the street after the pickup. When he got to the middle of the street he stopped, pulled the snub-nose out from under his shirt, and leveled it at the pickup. He stood that way for two, three seconds, but didn't fire. Maybe he was afraid of hitting Cherry. Instead of firing he started running off up the street after the pickup, which was stupid because the pickup was already a block away. I could still see Cherry's leg bouncing up and down, and right before the pickup disappeared something flew up and landed in the street. Then the pickup was over the hill, where the entrance ramps to I-630 are, and they could take Cherry anywhere they wanted.

Mr. Jimmy kept running. It was pathetic. I could almost hear the old bastard huffing and puffing from here. He didn't stop until he got to whatever it was that'd dropped to the pavement.

He picked it up and turned back toward the motel.

He walked right down the middle of the street. Nicollette, who must have seen the whole thing, said something to him as he passed but he didn't answer, just kept walking on across the motel parking lot until he was right beneath me. I thought he might say something to me, but he didn't even look up. I saw what he'd picked up, though—Cherry's shoe.

Get this, he was crying, yeah, Mr. Jimmy. I was sad about Cherry, too, but what it comes down to is, risk your neck messing with guys who'd beat you to death for a six-pack of PBR, or live to see what a new day brings you. Mr. Jimmy, though, he was rubbing the shoe up and down the side of his face and crying and saying, "My Cherry" over and over, only it wasn't quite "My Cherry" he was saying but "Ma Sherrie," like French or something. Or is that a song? I don't know, go figure, Mr. Jimmy crying and sort of crooning "Ma Sherrie," meaning he'd probably had some sort of fantasy about Cherry. Mr. Jimmy!

He's in for a lot of pain, which is what you get when you try to live in a fantasy world. No one can accuse me of that. Oh, sure, I had some hopes for Cherry, but I wasn't counting big on it. I don't count big on anything. Besides, if I'm a little sad now, I know that at least I can add the Cherry business to the list of experiences I can look back on as making up a pretty interesting life. I've seen a lot already, and I'm still a young man with more experiences coming down the road in my direction, bet on it, and when they arrive I'll be right here, watching.

Esther Lee

**Chimera in My Side, Forgiveness Behind
My Ribcage**

I came across a hardened thing of mine---
51% human, polyhedral in its design..

At home I fed it old jellybeans & ripe excuses.
Its blurred faces begged me for closure.

Tried to barter it at the local market, but vendors
thought it grotesque or a parody of itself. They'd say,

Last week's star fruit? Unsalvageable. People? Salvageable.
In disbelief, I serenaded myself until sundown.

Overnight the svelte thing turned behemoth,
chewed the letter in which you wrote: *While doing*

laundry today, I found a lottery ticket in my shirt pocket---
I spent more than a dollar of my time cleaning it out.

My heartburn was swift & procrastinated:
the aftertaste being paper, ink, misgivings.

Fernand Roqueplan

Everything Repeated Many Times

Met a man on a downtown Biloxi bus,
his affliction some doctor must
have phrases or explanations for:
everything repeated many times.
He described his house, called his house
yellow yellow yellow just like that;
thought maybe his mind worked in threes
then he said his favorite color—red

red red red. I wasn't sorry for him
or irritated, thought how nice
having a head jabbed full of words
stripped of eloquence,
sophistry and oration tripped up:
afflicted with everything
repeated many times,
how difficult it would be to lie.

Told me his name name name—
John. I asked him again and he said
“my name name name is John.”
Leashed to description
we call and contain, trammeled by ego
we badger and bestow.
“This is my stop stop
stop stop stop” John said, “the casino

with the red red red neon swordfish.”
Someone laughed and John stepped down.
When my turn came I whispered it a block
early to see how it sounded: stop stop
stop stop stop.

Inheriting a Future

I found her by accident. See, I was looking for a psychic, but instead I found Patsy Two Feathers, Native American healer, metaphysical adviser, and spiritual intuitive counselor. And oh, she's also a pet psychic, although she doesn't like that word, psychic, because it detracts from the seriousness and sincerity of her work. On weekends, she does house blessings, drumming workshops, and communicates with abused animals. Also, did I mention, she works full time as a real estate agent in New York City?

Over the phone, I tell her I'm interested in including her in an article about psychics. She sighs. She gets this a lot. She stopped listing herself under "Psychic" in the yellow pages a few years ago, because too many people like me called with the wrong idea. She is tired of this. In one articulate breath, she says she is a divorced, 42-year-old woman, three-quarters white and one-quarter Chickahominy, although she was baptized and raised strictly Roman Catholic, and she is not Madame X the kitschy psychic or anything. I get the feeling she is used to repeating this. I tell her that actually, this situation is much more interesting than a regular old psychic, and she agrees to be interviewed.

Patsy tells me there's a special place she has in mind, where she likes to meet, a place in which she will be able to "intuitively sense my energy."

"Do you know where the Wendy's is on Fifth Avenue?" She says.

Then she decides, no, the second floor of the lobby in a nearby hotel has better energy for her. She is big on energy.

"Besides, the Wendy's is so...pedestrian," she says.

She then tells me she has long black hair, but won't describe herself further, because "when we meet, intuitively, we will know one another." She asks me to uncross my legs if they're crossed, because it blocks the chakras, and they are, because I like to sit at my desk chair with my legs crossed when I'm on the phone. She asks my permission to say a prayer before we part ways. We agree to meet the next day, where the energy is good. I say okay, and she exhales another deep breath of words.

"With the father, son, and holy spirit as my guides, let our lord Jesus Christ look down on the union of a Miss Sarah Wexler and Patsy Two Feathers today. We ask for guidance and truth in writing this article, and to be blessed by the angels, guides, and higher spirits with nothing but light and positive energy," she says.

"Amen," I say. Amen? Do you say amen to this kind of prayer? I start to ask her how to respond, but she's already hung up.

When she walks through the revolving doors of the hotel, her corporate side is showing. She wears a black and white skirted business suit and three strands of pearls, sticking out her hand and then pulling me in for a hug. Patsy sits down across from me, pulls a pick from her purse, and quickly combs her hair. Her eyes are large and blue and friendly and her teeth are straight and white. She reminds me of the Disney cartoon version of Pocahontas: tall and thin, pretty Anglo facial features capped with flowing, black hair. She is 42, but the creases in her face don't tell the same story; she looks more like 35. For someone who's just worked an eight-hour day trying to sell houses, she is bursting with energy and seems enthralled someone wants to listen to her story.

"I'll get us some coffees," she says. "My treat." But before I can tell her that actually, I don't drink coffee, she's halfway over to the bar. Patsy is a tornado of efficiency.

She returns with two small white cups and saucers. "Thank you," I say. It's too late to refuse it now. I try to think of something

to say. "That was so nice of you to pay."

"Actually, I know you're a student and everything, but I'm short two bucks," she says. I rifle through my bag for my wallet and can't help making a face when my head is under the table. When I look up, I'm totally serious.

"No problem." I hand her the last two bills in my wallet. She brings them over to the bar and then sits back down, taking a sip of her black coffee. That's better. Now she's ready to talk.

I have a list here, questions about how she got into being a psychic, what a day in the life of a psychic is all about. But before I can ask, Patsy Two Feathers starts in with a long-winded biography.

"My legal, divorced name that I use in professional settings is Patsy Beck. I was the last of nine children born to my Greek father and half-English, half-Chickahominy mother. I didn't know I was of Native American lineage until I was 37 years old, five years ago, but in my own way, I guess I always knew," she says.

So, you're only one-quarter Chickahominy? And didn't find out about it until you've lived the greater part of your life as a white woman? And now this is how you're defining your entire identity? Um, I need a whole new list of questions. I try to write a note, but she's still talking so fast, it's hard to get it all down.

"My mother, Helen, was adopted out of her Chickahominy family and raised in a white, American family as a Roman Catholic. I was raised Native by her mother in terms of respect for the earth, animals, nature, and spirituality, but not in terms of Native language, religion, or ceremonies. My mother's Chickahominy heritage was never overtly discussed in our family and certainly not discussed in the church or community."

Her words are strung together so seamlessly I wonder how many people she's already told this story to. Rehearsed, like I came in with my pre-thought list of questions, and she came in with her pre-thought list of answers, and now she's just dispensing the

goods, making her delivery. Or maybe there's a tele-prompter behind me?

"My mother never wanted anyone to know, to be looked at as 'that Indian,'" she says. And although Patsy grew up watching western movies and TV shows in which Native Americans were negatively depicted as savages, she still felt connected to them.

"I was definitely the most Indian of all my siblings. It was never verbalized that I was different, but I always just knew it."

Then she tells me that when she was only three years old, she pulled her mother into the basement, saying there were Indians down there waiting to take her home with them. She's done research on this, she says, "very credible research." She tells me she's read about other Native American children having similar visions, called "ghost sickness," a state of intense communication with deceased ancestors.

"It's a very real and credible condition," Patsy says. "Psychologists are studying the psychological ramifications of this now, and soon you're going to see it all over the news." She makes sure I accept that it's credible, and then plows ahead with such conviction that I'm not sure whether she's trying to convince me or herself.

"I felt inexplicably alienated and disconnected as a child, having been cut off from my tribe, my culture, and my religion. I mean, I have a whole family out there, a whole history I have not tapped into yet, and I knew that."

Growing up, she tells me she was torn between "glamour girl and cowgirl," and even as an adult, says "I'm the ultimate tom-girl princess." Looking at her now, across the table in the lobby of a fancy hotel, the glamour girl seems to have won—the eyeliner, the feathered hair, the crisp suit. Then she tells me she studied Forestry for a year, thinking she'd be a park ranger. A park ranger? Like, with the khaki shorts and the wide-brim hat? I can't tell whether she was a different kind of person then or if she just has no idea who she is.

"Then I became interested in travel and nightlife," she says, which is more in accordance with how she seems now. "I got a B.S. degree in Real Estate Management," she says. "Or was it a B.A.? I'll have to check my diploma when I get home." I think she realizes that this makes her sound less credible, the thing she fears most, and so she plows ahead listing all of the places she worked in the real estate industry: Vegas and Reno, Atlantic City, Miami.

"I still felt bothered and disconnected, but I just went on living life," she says. "God, when I say it like that, it sounds terrible. I ignored my heart."

I imagine her wandering through those 15 years, trying to figure out who she was.

"But it got to a point," she says, all dramatic. "I knew something was wrong, that I had to blend my professional life with my spiritual life." She got a B.S. a few years ago in Metaphysics from a "distance-learning" program, the American Institute of Holistic Theology, says it like I should know exactly what metaphysics and holistic and theology all mean together. But before I can ask, she's onto her heritage search.

"I discovered that my mother was a 'Lost Bird,' separated from her tribe through adoption, which made me a confirmed Native," she says. I want to ask her what exactly is a "heritage search"? And what desperation for an identity drove her to even try this? And if she'd discovered she was of German ancestry, would she be going around proclaiming herself with such gusto as a German healer?

But she's going on about The Big News, and there is no interrupting her now. She gets excited just talking about it, her eyes wide and animated. Officially, she was a second generation Native American.

"I was a part of something, and it felt so right. There's the hope of a whole new family and heritage to discover," she says. Something to tap into, to latch onto? Patsy was no longer just a

single, middle-aged, white woman who works as a real estate agent and feels estranged from her family. Now she is Native American, a feature she's built her life around for the last five years.

"I have this whole family out there in the world," she says. "Tribal Enrollment Status is not a money thing, it's a family thing, you know? The financial benefits have nothing to do with it." If it's not the money, I wonder what, exactly, Patsy is cashing in on.

After talking about herself for almost an hour without pausing for even an *mm-hmm* from me, she stops, mid-sentence.

"I don't want you to feel like I'm being too wordy here," she says. And then keeps going right where she left off.

Patsy has applied to the Canadian government for Tribal Enrollment Status, which would entitle her to all food, housing, and education programs offered to the Chickahominy, although she claims these benefits are not what she's after. More importantly, though, it would add validity to her claim on Native American roots. She's written a children's astrology book which hasn't been published, and she feels that the Tribal Enrollment Status will add to her credibility, making her books more desirable to publishers. A Native American folktale is a lot more marketable when it's written by what's called a "card-carrying" Native American, and Patsy's experience in the world of business and sales has made her savvy. So she did the necessary research, sent off the paperwork, and waited.

It is now four years later, and I'm sitting across from Patsy in the lobby of a fancy hotel. She's still waiting. It turns out that much of the necessary paperwork for her Tribal Enrollment Status, such as the birth certificate, adoption, and foster care records of her mother, are being tied up by the state of Virginia, and probably will not be released until her mother's death. Patsy is hopeful—she lives by that word, every day, hope. But she's also tired. Tired of working full-time in a spiritually-void job to pay the bills, running her practice on nights and weekends, working so diligently to receive the tribal

status she feels she's entitled to. Four whole years she's been waiting, tired, hoping.

"I feel like I'm a senior in high school, like I've put in my four years and now if I can just hold out a little longer, I can graduate. I can get my tribal enrollment status." She says that the ability to be authentic means everything to her, and getting the government recognition would give her credibility.

"People would have to recognize then that I am an Indian woman. I mean, the Enrollment card is as valid as a driver's license, and nobody every questions that."

She's so articulate in telling me about her plight to claim the one thing she's known her whole life. She wants it so bad that I can feel the longing, palpably, weighing on the shoulders of her business suit. She tells me she wants to be recognized by the government to connect with a lost family, but she doesn't say why she hasn't contacted them in the four years she's been waiting for her card to arrive. She shakes her head and changes the subject, and I notice that along with the prim pearl necklace, she's also wearing tiny dream catcher earrings, so small I almost didn't notice.

I ask about her family, their take on her return-to-roots.

"My siblings haven't chosen to walk the native ways," she says. "My family is not really comfortable with my decision." Neither was her husband, who divorced her soon after her heritage search. In Patsy's honest attempt to discover a once-severed limb of her family tree, it seems she's strained the branches on her same stalk. But Patsy would rather not go into details—she's very specific about what to print and not to print.

"I'll tell you this off the record," she says. "Don't write this down in your little notebook," like if it's not written down, the words can just evaporate. I'm beginning to realize why Patsy needs this Enrollment card.

She also does animal communications. "I was doing this a

decade before that pet psychic on TV came along, whatever-her-name-is. But no one would accept it—I guess New York is a pretty square town and I’m just a naturally progressive person.”

Patsy is extremely comfortable talking about her interests and authenticity, but good luck with the touchy stuff.

“Has finding your heritage has been worth the trouble it’s caused with your family?” I say.

She looks panicked. She jumps up from the table.

“I’ll go refill our coffees. One moment, please,” she says, darting towards the bar, even though I’ve only managed a few sips from my cup. She says that a lot, “One moment, please,” in a situation where anyone else would go “Hmmm” or “Hang on a sec.” I can tell she is a receptionist by trade. When Patsy sits back down, she’s her usual articulate, composed self, and then she’s got a ten-minute answer for me, which she recites as though she’s been practicing it at the bar.

An hour later, I try to ask her a financial question. “Do you think you’ll ever be able to leave real estate and have the psychic and healing practice be your sole support?” Again, the panic face.

“One moment, please,” she says. She looks down, and I’m worried that she’s starting to cry. Keeping her head down, she says, “With the father, son, and holy spirit as my guides, let our lord Jesus Christ look down on Patsy Two Feathers with the guidance and truth of the higher spirits.” After a minute of silence, she looks up. “I need to go to the women’s restroom. I was told to take a few minutes to gain clarity.” She pushes her chair back and is gone. Now, I have never found clarity in the women’s restroom, but then again, I am not Patsy Two Feathers.

She walks briskly back to the table and begins the monologue.

“I’d love to have my practice be my sole job, but I won’t be able to do that for a few years.” She leans towards me across the table. “I think I can leave real estate in five years, but no one knows that and

let's keep it that way," she whispers like we're KGB spies. Then she launches into her plans for the future—hope, that persistent word.

"I want my writing, lectures, songs, and dance to bring Native American culture into mainstream America and abroad, but it's all hinging on enrollment status," she says, sighing. "I hope it's almost time for graduation," she tells me, and hugs me goodbye.

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The interviews are over. Now is the time to reflect and write, and I feel like I have a good grasp of what Patsy is all about.

I call her and say, "Thanks so much for your time. I'll send you a copy of the draft." But she can't stay away. She stops by my apartment two days in a row to drop off some information that might be helpful, although I haven't been home either time.

"How did you know where I live?" I ask when she calls to find out where I was.

"You wrote down your address on an envelope for me to mail you some research, and I figured, 'Why not stop by?'" she says. I don't tell her: because there is a fine line between being available and being a stalker.

"Why haven't you called me back?" she says. "Are your roommates erasing my messages? Let this be just a taste for you of the racism I deal with every day of my life." Racism. This coming from a woman who lived 37 years as a white person, and feels persecuted because I'm trying to tactfully stop calling her back?

For the past two weeks, when I trudge up two steep flights of stairs to my apartment, I find a large manila envelope in front of the door, covered in typed stickers that read: "PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL. TO BE OPENED BY ADDRESSEE ONLY!!!" I'm sure my neighbors think I am ordering porn. I sigh and bring it inside, one light envelope after another that are

becoming an increasingly heavy burden. My answering machine is blinking, a little red light I used to look forward to seeing. There are usually two almost-identical messages, and they go like this:

“Patsy Two Feathers calling for Sarah Z. Wexler. Sarah, please call me to confirm you received my mailing. Also, please don’t open the envelope before 7:11 pm, due to strict numerological reasons.” I sigh and hit the erase button, knowing that if I don’t call her back tonight, I’ll have two more messages and a lot of explaining to do. I think: this is worse than having an overprotective boyfriend. I think: having an overprotective boyfriend might be nice right now.

“Do you think I can come over and have an intuitive session with your cat?” Patsy says in our third phone conversation of the day.

“Well, it’s my roommate’s cat, so I don’t think....”

“Because I’m sensing some blockage. Has your cat been into any cheese lately, or the peanut butter?” she says.

“No, but you know what...Oh my god...he did eat a chicken breast off the stove last night,” I hear myself saying. I realize I’m starting to sound like the people who believe in Patsy Two Feathers, who want so desperately to believe that they can will a psychic’s words to ring true. This is bad. I put the finishing touches on my profile and send it off to my editor.

I leave for a week’s vacation, hoping the Patsy Situation will magically vanish in my absence. But when I return, there are five increasingly concerned messages from her on my machine. I’m beginning to realize there is a point where desperation becomes obsession, in which I started out as someone who listened and became, in Patsy’s mind, the only person who cared. I’m trying not to be annoyed, because this is sad in a way. In my pile of mail, mostly bills and catalogues for clothes I can’t afford, there is another large manila envelope. Patsy has edited my draft, signing her name in flowing cursive on the bottom of every single page. She

includes a letter making sure I received her phone messages from Tuesday at 12:47 pm and Thursday at 5:13 pm. She is overly professional, and I'm beginning to understand why she doesn't have any close relationships. Snuck in at the bottom of the letter, she edits:

"Please change the spelling from 'adviser' to 'advisor' in the first paragraph. This is due to my personal spiritual beliefs in Lexigrams."

I take a deep breath and call her. I thank her and say that I met my deadline, that the article is done, that there's really no more business between us. Still, every two or three days I get another message, telling me she has urgent news updates on her story. In a way, I am more similar to Patsy Two Feathers than I'd thought. We are both waiting, every single day hoping, for some sort of graduation, for a release.

The Hairball Oracle

Like a soft sneaker crab, if you like, as you
Watch, like, a lock or that disease
Medical students so often get.
I offered to pass them on, to pass
Them, to pass on them, the peas the
Demographics fragrant in the parking lot
Three guys walked into a bar

With a nine inch prick etc.
Wait a minute. But what's that burning
Smell? What's that sucking sound? Oh I don't
Know, it sounds rather convenient to me. I could
Forego my obligation. But I'm booked,
Slated or fated for the show, hooked
Like burrs in a dog's fur, if you have one,

A gift from down below as though
Once a year or so I think of the song *Cool Jerk*
Soul Of The 60s would like to prove him wrong
But something you can't finish. *Want some of this?*
Instead of too early or too late? The way
Musicians always are. I guess that's
Why they're musicians. That's why

They call it money—something for
Musicians to get upset about.

I bet the table is broken, the pool
Full of bacteria so reluctant the cleaner
Like a pipe cleaner or chimney sweep,
Innocence or expedience. And perhaps it does,
Has or doesn't, hasn't, to the degree of beauty,

Or in dermatology. And why not be,
The mutant bats ask flocking out of the
Mine shaft. Keep the roots in the jelly jars
And the sharpshooter at the window is me.
With a flamethrower the cue left in the tub
The way one bends staves making drums
Or barrels the clamps are the essential things.

A Crude Interest

Narcolepsy and insomnia alternately the snow
Creeping into the shoe at the same
Part of the same song, castaways
Kneeling there, waiting for the crops to take.
The two of them sitting with shit-eating
Grins or like the proverbial cat that they
Were so damn hip and then they wanted

To tell us of their ingenuousness.
I mean the one who devoured my favorite canary.
Supine bodies to make them list to the right
And the list goes on, the sugar beets. Not so far
Or much longer. Get the door darling
And close it in his face.
Tender embrasures softening the reed

And remembering above all how
The mouthpiece fits the song appalls
The monkey talks the pure mind can move
Inside the stall. "Do you need to use
The crapper?" Boris Karloff's hands and face
Are terribly familiar no less so than
Yours. No, less so. Set the toaster

On BOING. Scrape the burnt toast into the compost
With a dull butter knife. Water down the ketchup

Jar. Not a complaint. The perp was playing
Bongo drums (*sic*). A dull hammer head
Shark. For once I decided not to screen a call—
Of course it was a telemarketer
Selling caller ID. A good summation of a pickle.

I dropped a dime on him. A heavy dime.
Tell them it's time for bloodletting or subletting.
Never let on you knew me when I was and so on and
So on. People who live in plastic houses shouldn't
Use blowtorches. And some of them do. You can see it
On the news, the caloric intensity with which
A plastic Christmas tree melts.

Postcards from the Devil's Isles

Horseshoe Bay

No one could stomach Sarah Marsaw except for me. When I was fourteen, she moved into my life and into the house next door. It was rented out to Canadian families stationed in Bermuda with the Canadian Forces Base, so every two years I was introducing myself to a new family. Sarah was the same age as me, with sandy blond, poodle-permed hair that was synonymous with the 80's. With the hair came the most wired person I had ever known. She spoke in rapid succession, said "AY" often and would giggle out of control about her crush on teen actor Corey Haim. Sarah forced me to watch "Pee Wee's Playhouse" and "Hey Vern, It's Ernest!" (something I would not admit to my peers even now). At fourteen, Sarah hadn't quite matured with the make-up wearing boy-chasers that she should have identified with, but she was slowly making her way around that corner. Her idea of a joke was sticking her combination pine-scented/Danish Blue cheese feet into my face, or sitting on top of me and letting one rip on my bare stomach. Sarah drove the animals from the house. The cat would curl in the ledge of the kitchen window and watch for her. When Sarah appeared skipping across the yard, the cat would promptly disappear from the house until my mother called her in for dinner. The cat did this because Sarah would tickle her until she was sick, or would take pride in sticking masking tape on her butt, making the cat drag herself across the floor. When I was invited to pool parties, I was penalized by my friends for bringing Sarah with me; all the while my mother's voice

floated through my head saying, “Lee, why don’t you take Sarah with you to Melissa’s pool party? She always invites you to the beach and to the Canadian Base dances.” How could I turn Sarah down? My mother made me feel like such a heel. But in truth, Sarah grew on me. On the last Christmas that she spent in Bermuda, before her family returned to Canada, I gave her a gold, heart-shaped pendant that separated, so that we could each wear one half. When the pendants were placed together, they read, “BEST FRIENDS.”

The postcard is a picture of the most popular beach in Bermuda—Horseshoe Bay. It is curved in the shape of a horseshoe, where the shoreline has eroded, just short of cutting into the sand dunes. During the two summers that I knew her, Sarah and I would sit with the tourists on the public bus to Horseshoe, acting as tour guides by pointing out the favorable attractions like Dolphin Cove and the Devil’s Hole. Devil’s Hole was an abyss-like cavern that connected with the sea through an underwater channel. It was a great attraction for tourists, but an even greater one for the sea turtles, nurse sharks and parrot fish, because they received free grub from the tourists. Sarah and I spent our summers at Horseshoe Bay, battling the waves and pickling in the water, until the clouds promptly rolled across the sky at four. That’s how we knew it was time to go home; it always rained around four in the afternoon. Sarah was married this summer in Ontario to a guy named Justin, something no one thought she would ever do. She was just the type of person you could not keep down. A free spirit. But, there was someone who desired to catch her laughter and put it in his pocket and that person was Justin. I penned my postcard this summer to congratulate them on their new engagement. The message consisted of little more than, “Sarah and Justin, heard you were engaged. Congratulations...” But Sarah caught the message, one that could only be found in the photograph.

Somerset Bridge

The Sabos were a couple living in the suburbs of New York City who rented out the downstairs of their house to Rockland Community College students, and I was their second tenant. The first was a Japanese student named Miyuki who was 26 and drove a second-hand, coffee brown Ford Escort that seized up during her first month of owning it. Miyuki moved out when she decided that her accommodations were too small to move her rather large Japanese family, consisting of her parents and younger siblings, to America. Mr. Sabo was a semi-retired school teacher who substituted at county schools and thought that children today were “little monsters” and that he “couldn’t wait to finally kick-back and enjoy his twilight years.” These were about the most damaging words I’d ever heard him use. On a whole, he was cheery and serene by nature. Mrs. Sabo was doctor of psychology and owner of a Biofeedback clinic. She was the mirror image in personality to Mr. Sabo, except she would spiral into a chain of “wonderfuls” in our small-talk of how I was doing and how my parents were. “Oh, my parents are fine,” I would say, “Dad is designing a new kitchen for a client and my mom is planning a cruise with her sisters to Puerto Rico and the Bahamas.” Dr. Sabo would reply, splicing shoots of asparagus, “Oh, that’s just wonderful dear, just wonderful, wonderful...” The Sabos assisted me with problems that I was having at school that were not conducive to learning, like when I walked out of Dr. Craig’s seminar because he blatantly denied the existence of Christ in his “Mysteries in History” class. Although I was unsure about dropping the course from early on in the semester, I waited out the chance that I might get through his class, despite the fact that he had every student in it petrified. I patiently sat through his strange diversions into “some SUV almost running him off the road that morning” and each time he redirected his focus back to the

topic, he would somehow be reminded and spit incomprehensible ramblings about that damned black SUV! He was so anal, and he also became erratic in class over the fact that “Betsy Ross did not found the American Flag.” When I walked out of his class, Dr. Craig called me over in the library while I was scanning the stacks and tried to coerce me into returning to his seminar, promising I would not be penalized for my absence. Then he tried to put his arm around me. I came to the conclusion Dr. Craig was a knowledgeable ignoramus who hadn’t had sex in a while. That’s why he kept going on about that “Damned SUV!” The Sabos helped me significantly in my first year at Rockland by advising the right protocol in this situation. When I left the Sabos to go to school at College of Notre Dame, I bought them a decorated pitcher with red hummingbirds feeding on honeysuckle—a move that was sheer intuition. I didn’t realize that Dr. Sabo owned a cabinet full of collectible pitchers until she gratefully eased the hummingbird pitcher into the glass cabinet with a tear in her eye and a chain of “Wonderfuls” on her lips.

I sent the Sabos a picture of Somerset Bridge, reportedly the smallest drawbridge in the world and one that had to be restructured in recent years because it no longer “drew.” It was from this bridge, that young boys would swan-dive into the clear water below; water that was so shallow, you could see the sea anemones and sponges that lined the bottom. Bus loads of tourists would stop, centered on the bridge, and you could hear the crackle of the microphone as the driver relayed specific details about the bridge’s history. A group of eager faces would hover at the windows, all on one side of the bus, anxious for the moment they were allowed to take pictures. When extra-tall sea craft needed to cross the channel, pilots had to wait on a stoplight before easing through the tight slit of an opening. The drawbridge’s function in its simplicity did not pose a problem for sea craft until the height of boating season, when the channel was particularly backed-up on the summer holidays. At this time of year,

there were possibly more people on Yachts and pleasure craft than on land. A boy named Felix who sat in my primary school classes lost his father at the edge of Somerset Bridge because it is situated on the crest of a sharp corner. His father was leaving the gas station and crossing the street when a bus slammed into him. He died instantly and Felix and his mother, whose house overlooked that bad corner and the bridge, would have to relive that scene over and over again. The message on the back of the postcard addressed to the Sabos was, "Beginnings and Endings, and bridges in between. Thanks for everything..."

Gombeys

The summer my family invited Eric to visit Bermuda was the year my father invited two Gombey tribes to stop at our house for refreshments between destinations. In an instant, our house was overflowing with people streaming through every doorway. It was like one of those movies where there is a knock at the guys front door and when he opens it, there is a sea of faces and streams of kids come pushing through the doorway. Instant party. (I think that was *Weird Science*.) Costumed guys with their masks off were standing around in the pitch black of the yard with plastic cups of some intoxicating refreshment. Their kids were weaving themselves around their ankles or dangling upside down on the swing-set, calling for their mothers to watch them do some trick. Elevated voices with exaggerated laughter came from the veranda and the packed bar area. In the middle of the bar area, one of the tribe leaders was banging the bass drum with vigor, while the others bounced on their heels, down to the floor and up again, like Russian dancers. My mother was in the kitchen complaining at the noise Eric

had created when he'd pulled out his own African drum. When the fun started to finally die down about an hour later, Eric grabbed his camera, taking shots of the Gombey from the top of the veranda walls and by standing on the arms of the living room chairs like a crazed photographer. Then he posed for shots with the two tribe leaders and crouched on one knee for a picture with the youngest of the two groups, a spunky performer who was only three.

I knew Eric from my last two years of high school in Atlanta. In college, Eric had studied sociology and was always eager to know about different cultures and religions and how they might be connected. This is why I sent him a postcard with three Gombey dancing in front of a palm tree. If I didn't know any better, I'd say Eric was a Gombey fanatic, ever since my family had invited him to Bermuda that summer. He gathered any information and paraphernalia he could collect, justifying their cause, because at one point the Gombey were banned from performing at all. Originally, the Gombey were a group of male dancers, also found in the West Indies, who were derived from West Africa. Their garb consisted of *Joseph's Technicolor Dreamcoat* type sequined cloaks and extended, feathered crowns that reached three feet high. They wore wire masks on their faces, probably to disguise themselves, and would dance a syncopated rhythm in the streets to the beat of a drum, similar to the one you might envision the "little drummer boy" tapping. A second base drum also accompanied the group. In Bermuda, each parish is known to have a Gombey tribe. I sent the Gombey postcard to Eric in Atlanta where he was teaching summer school this year, with the words, "Having fun in Bermuda, where are you?" because I know he would have wanted to be here.

Hamilton Harbor

Johnny Jones had visited Bermuda at least twice a year since I was eleven. She was a registered pediatric nurse from Delaware who spent all of her vacation time on the island at the local bars, especially one bar in particular--the *Charing Cross*, named after the British landmark. Whenever Aunt Johnny visited, she would think nothing of stopping to claim her 'reserved' seat at the bar with luggage in hand. My parents and I would set eyes on her the morning after as she shuffled out into the kitchen in her flowered housecoat with gold bangles up to her elbows. Aunt Johnny often slept in her jewelery and make-up, so her mascara would be smeared around her eyes, giving her a raccoon-likeness. Since she had visited the island over 100 times, Aunt Johnny was interviewed and featured on the front page of the local newspaper, *The Royal Gazette*. She came to Bermuda so frequently that she didn't need to call for a ride. There were a slew of random locals who would drive her the 20 miles/40 mph to the Liles residence and since we were the only *Liles* family on the island, everyone knew where to go. At one point, Aunt Johnny dated a family friend I called Uncle Howard. You knew when Uncle Howard was coming to pay a visit because he drank as well, and when he did, he would walk up the street, yelling to my father, "Johnny Liles, I'm comin' for ya scotch!" Uncle Howard was like a cowboy without a horse. His legs curved in a bow, giving him the look of an authentic cowboy. Once Aunt Johnny and her friend Caroline went out to a New Year's party with Uncle Howard, who was driving a borrowed car. When they were coming home, Uncle Howard somehow drove the car on top of the neighbor's three foot wall, where the lot met the short wall at an incline. While the car teetered balanced dead center on its belly, Aunt Johnny and Caroline began wailing loud enough to get me out of my bed, along with my parents and the neighbors. "Oh,

my God... Howard let us out of the car. Let us out!" They were a blubbering mess. The police department had to be called to get them out of the car; had they attempted to get out on their own, the car would have flipped over.

I picked the postcard with a view of Hamilton Harbor because I was thinking about the time we actually played tourist-for-a-day, since Aunt Johnny had never really been a tourist. We ate at the Harbourfront Restaurant where we had a birds-eye view of the tourists coming down the gangway of the cruise ship, *The Nordic Empress*. The tourists seemed to be in awe of the pastel colored buildings and the smiles on the locals' faces, who were strolling along the walkway under the canvassed store entrances, leisurely enjoying their timeless lunch breaks. Here, you could greet anyone on the street and get a hearty greeting in return, along with spare change for a "How are you?" and a "Have a good day!" Here, people genuinely cared and this is why Aunt Johnny returned to the island and never grew bored of the fact that it was only 22 square miles, and it might have been a relatively slow-paced existence for some people. Its appeal was the people. Coming on a trip to Bermuda was like leaping into a Dr. Suess book. Bermuda was just *Who-ville*. On our tourist-for-a-day outing, we enjoyed two \$20 Bermuda Rockfish platters and Aunt Johnny bought herself a gold watch from *Vera P. Card* with a little island shaped in gold and a black, opal background. Along with it, she bought T-shirts for her mother, sister and two sons, Christopher and Kevin, and her new grandbaby, Zoe, who was just finding her new independence by learning to walk. Aunt Johnny didn't care about the superstitious *Bermuda Triangle* theory because, heck, how many times had she been through that thing? Aunt Johnny's postcard read—"From one, *One-horse-town* to another.... I'll see you on Bermuda Day!"

You are my journey; my experience, and ultimately, the keepers of my final destination....

Mark DeCarteret

Poisoned Tale

Head squalls, an almost snow
bedding down in my skull.
Leaves reveal their contaminants.
Footage of malls and their runoff,
an epic that streams under noon sun
where dust is more adjective,
some mood for the ages.

He comes with the papers,
eyes like two padlocks,
his face a fat pyramid--
a perennial sucker for history,
when clouds shadowboxed in the meadow
and sheep actual-sized aired
those bluest of tongues.

Permits scale the trees.
This could be me they have
hung on their back.
I don't like my selves either,
but I've worked at it otherwise,
getting used to the shopping--
so let's say it's burgers tonight.

No more red-ringed receiver.
No more naps with the dead.

I will smash myself into the moon
cause your dad is a bum head.
Cause your dad's a small ant.
Unpackaged like the battle songs of old-
words often work once and that's all.

Slice

You couldn't have wedged
a small target slid sideways
between us all those years
you were preparing for senility
so why try even now to shout up
to the gods on their scaffolding?
You had promised me a parable,
these miraculous implants of wisdom
but all you talked was more doughnuts
in these faraway haunts,
performed tricks that left splotches,
your invocations all bone-poor, nothing else.
A moth humps a light switch
all greasy with fingertips
while you went about explaining this last face--
the pillow you take to the monsters each night
while the transistor cracked updates,
more commercials for aching,
your doll legs a continuous mess
best kept far under the sheets.
Once you laid an old buddy out with a drive,
his head pouring out from most everywhere
and you tell me all the doctor could do
was say it's a sunspot for the love of God
and what the hell were they thinking?
I swear he could once fit

most the apostles sideways in his mouth,
could see to most worlds and their undoing
with the passion of a chess bum,
always dropping himself where
he couldn't be missed or denied.
So let me explain those lost highways again--
how he ground out those gears while he slept
still muscling his likeness into meaning,
and the fingernails I clipped now rocking
like gondolas on the end table
while he asked for a mirror to see
where even more of him's escaped
even though there is less and less light
and a lot fewer mornings to complain.

The Breakfast Mute

I prefer to receive bad news first thing in the morning so I have something to keep me company over breakfast. Most bad news isn't so considerate. It comes over the phone or in the mail when you're not ready for it. But the news of my illness, my final illness, I was expecting. It came in an envelope ready to open when I saw fit.

I had become conscious of a pain beneath my dress, beneath my skin, deep in my bones. Not a normal arthritic ache but a pain likely to end my story here on this earth. I went down to Dr. Porter's office and he ran some tests.

"I'm sorry to hear you're not well," he said.

"How do you know I don't just ache?" I said. He had that painting on his wall where the dogs are playing poker. He somewhat resembled a Doberman, all pointy in the face.

"You said it was a deep ache," he said. "The deeper the ache, the less well you are."

His nurse jabbed me with a needle and took several little vials of blood. "It's amazing what they can tell from just a little bit of blood," she said. She was a perky woman, bouncing from one duty to the next. Sadly, I could only briefly recall ever being that way. She said, "Your whole life story's in a couple of vials."

But I didn't want to know my whole life story. I just wanted to know whether or not I was going to keep living. So when Dr. Porter came back in, I laid it out for him.

"I don't want to know the details and see all the test results from the lab," I said. "I don't want to know specifically what it is. And I don't want any calls to the house. Only a letter in the mail so

I can open it first thing in the morning and plan the rest of my life accordingly. Just write a letter that tells me whether or not it's terminal."

"As you wish," he said.

A few days went by and then the letter came in the mail. I waited until the next morning to open it. On a sheet of yellow legal paper, he had scratched out the following:

Dear Mabel,

It's terminal.

Sorry,

Dr. Jerry Porter

I finished my bowl of Grape Nuts and started spreading jam on my toast. I like eating my toast cold so I drop it in the toaster as soon as I'm up, allowing the toast time to cool off. I looked at the letter again. It was bad news, no doubt, but news can only be so bad when it's expected. I'd already decided that whenever it came for me, whatever it was, that I would accept it and let it take me. Too many people try to hang on, pumped full of medicine by their doctors until they sit in their wheelchairs at a nursing home with their mouths hanging open and their eyes blank. Their grandmothers, fifty years gone, could come back from the dead and stand right in front of them and they wouldn't even raise an eyebrow.

I wanted no more than a moment to hear the train rattling down the tracks toward me or feel the blow of a metal pipe to the back of my head, exclaim "shit"—I am a Christian, but hate to admit if I have a final word that this will be it—and pass on to the other side. But I knew once the pains started that this wasn't the type of death I was going to have, and I knew I didn't want to have my brother Chester taking care of me, giving me my baths, changing my clothes.

I sat pondering the letter and a piece of cold toast. Perhaps I should have kept track of cold toast the way Chester kept track of

his breakfasts with his friend Ed. The two of them had eaten breakfast at Connell's every morning for umpteen years. A few days after their first breakfast, Chester wrote "BREAKFASTS WITH ED" on the top line of a legal pad and used hash marks to tally the number of breakfasts they'd had together. He kept the legal pad in the coffee table drawer. But cold toast didn't compare to friendship.

I don't know what put Ed and Chester together since they were such opposites. Maybe because they were both batchers. Maybe since neither of them served in the war. The two of them eating breakfast together seemed like some strange tradition that makes sense only to men, like the way young boys will pound each others' arms to show affection. Whatever their reasons, I decided that, starting the next day, I would go to breakfast with them. I didn't want to be alone, though I never minded loneliness before. My longstanding indifference toward their breakfasts had turned to envy.

The day after I opened the letter, I got up half an hour before Chester and sat ready and waiting at the kitchen table when he came down to warm up his car. (He warmed it up year round. I'd never learned how to drive.) I wore one of my nicer house dresses, a blue one with some lace on the cuffs.

He jumped a little when he walked in the kitchen and saw me sitting at the table holding my purse.

"You're up early. Feeling okay?" he asked. He scrunched up his forehead like he was trying to see inside me.

"Fine," I said.

"Well, what are you doing?" Functioning on auto pilot, he floated over to the key hook.

"Thought I'd go to breakfast with you and Ed."

His hand stopped short of the keys, his fingers opening and closing ever so slowly.

"I won't bother you," I said.

He cupped his hand against his ear like he wasn't hearing me correctly. "I'd have to check with Ed."

"Would you like me to call him?" He went for the keys again but only succeeded in knocking them off the hook. It was clear that I had thrown off his morning routine.

"He's not going to expect a phone call this early in the morning. It'll shake him up and give him a bad case of heart burn. You want to be responsible for that?"

"I'll sit at another table."

"That'd be awful weird."

My threat of sitting at another table proved to be the turning point in the argument, and he agreed to take me along.

I remember asking Chester two questions during the five-block drive from our house to Connell's: Which one of you two gets there first, and how much do each of you tip?

He didn't answer the first question, pretended like he didn't even hear it. The second question he did answer but huffed and mumbled before he said anything, my disturbance of his brief moment of solitude between home and diner too much for him. He spoke in a monotone when he gave his answer: "Ed tips five percent every day. Ten between Thanksgiving and Christmas. I tip ten if they don't slop coffee into my saucer, zero if they do."

He parked the car, slowly edging the front tires to the curb. I could see Ed sitting at a table by the window and next to a very ugly fern. The fern covered his torso so that his head floated above a mess of faded green leaves.

Chester and I had a difficult time negotiating the few feet between the car and the door to Connell's. He walked ahead then slowed down and let me catch up, but then perhaps thought better of it and took the lead again. We ended up reaching the door at the

same time and standing there for a few moments, each of us rocking back and forth slightly, me thinking I should open the door but also that he might want to open it for me, him probably thinking he should be polite and get the door but then remembering this was his sister horning in on his breakfast tradition and not a date.

When we got to Ed, the table, and the fern, Chester pointed at me and said, through gritted teeth, "Don't ask me to explain." Ed kept blinking while he looked me over, as if after one of the blinks I would simply disappear.

"Hello, Edward," I said. He was surprisingly well-kept for such an old man. He dyed his hair orange and wore a white casual suit with no tie.

"What brings you out, Mabel?" he asked.

"I wanted to see what all the fuss was about. What kept you coming back here morning after morning, Edward," I said. I looked around. I'd only been in Connell's a few times and, as well as I could remember, never for breakfast. Farmers sat around in packs, occasionally adjusting their seed caps. Two young waitresses shot about, neither of them looking overjoyed but both of them, I guessed, trying not to make that too noticeable. Chester and Ed certainly weren't coming every morning for the atmosphere. The place was rather gloomy in the early morning light.

"I tried to tell her," Chester said. He sat down without so much as even instructing me on where I could get an extra chair.

Ed quit blinking and said, "Edward. I like being called that. Think I'll go by that from now on."

"You can't change your name at seventy-five," Chester said.

Ed shrugged. "Says who?"

I scooted a chair over from an empty table and plopped myself down with as much grace as can be expected from a woman my age. "You don't make the rules, Chester," I said. The fern sat right in front of me like it was my breakfast date. Dust coated the leaves and

I realized it was a plastic fern.

“Does it even say Edward on your birth certificate?” he said.

I could see Ed pondering this, scratching his chin in deep thought. “Don’t know that I’ve ever seen my birth certificate.”

I felt the stares of the diner regulars on me. You’d have thought I was interrupting a famous Hollywood couple at The Brown Derby. I decided to ignore the other regulars. With so little time left in my life, I didn’t want to waste energy worrying about what other people thought of me. When it came to our family, Chester took care of that.

“Did you watch Fair Queen Spotlight yesterday evening?” Chester asked his friend.

And before he could answer I said, “What have you been up to lately, Edward?”

“I got my tonsils sprayed,” he said.

“You still have your tonsils?” I said.

Ed leaned toward me and opened his mouth wide, giving me a good view of them, all pink and healthy.

“Honest to God,” Chester said.

Chester finished his breakfast quickly that morning, tipped ten percent since the waitress slopped no coffee into his saucer, smiled at each person we passed as he made his way to the cash register, and said nothing from when we left the diner to when we got home.

Once we were home, he stomped across the kitchen and into the living room. I heard a crash and looked in to see what household item he had abused. The drawer from the coffee table lay on the floor, and he sat on the couch making a hash mark on his “Breakfasts with Ed” legal pad. “You said ‘I won’t bother you.’ How’s keeping us sidetracked from our discussion of fair queens not bothering?” he asked.

“I’m sorry. I guess I was just excited to be there.”

He shook the pen at me. "You're not going tomorrow," he blurted like a little kid who has missed his nap.

"You don't own that restaurant," I said and walked back in the kitchen.

"It's our thing. I'm not driving you. I won't let you in the car."

"I can walk down there." My hands shook just the slightest bit. I'd never enjoyed conflict but now was causing it for some reason. I turned the kitchen faucet on but remembered there were no dishes to do.

He yelled, "You won't do that either. What will people think? I'm driving? You're walking? Don't look right."

"I'll just sit there and not say a word." I heard the coffee table drawer scrape the hard wood, followed shortly by the slamming of the drawer back in place.

"You won't call him Edward?"

I stared out the window above the sink at the yellowing grass. "No."

"You won't talk about his tonsils?"

I felt Chester's presence in the kitchen doorway. "He brought them up."

"You kept asking about them."

He agreed to let me attend a second breakfast, and I agreed to remain silent. I didn't worry that night about Chester possibly sneaking off to the diner without me the next morning. He knew I really would walk down to Connell's if he chose not to drive me, and I knew nothing worried him more than what other people might think of him.

I looked forward to sitting at the table and watching the two of them try to act like I wasn't there. A little late-in-life mischief wouldn't damn me. It wasn't as if I was shoplifting at the jewelry store. It gave a little excitement to life, more than being good and trying to avoid all sins in my last days.

On the second day at Connell's, Chester immediately let Ed know how I should, or more accurately shouldn't, be addressed.

"She's not here," he said.

Ed looked puzzled. "I see her." He clanged a spoon on the side of his coffee cup, stirring some sugar in.

"Act like you don't." Chester whipped his chair out and threw himself down on it, perhaps thinking a few moves of mild violence would send me scurrying away like a timid cat.

Ed stood to fetch a chair for me, but Chester motioned for him to stay seated. "What did I tell you?" Chester asked.

Ed sat back down and gave me a desperate look. I walked over and grabbed a chair for myself.

"This isn't polite," Ed said.

"And butting in on our breakfast is?" Chester said.

"Well . . ."

"Well is right. Don't talk to her."

I sat at the table and listened to them talk about weather, the Cubs, and the Fair Queen Spotlight. Ed shot a flirtatious glance, a faint smile or a wink, at me every so often. Chester seemed uncomfortable, dropping his fork, losing the line of conversation again and again. Finally, he looked at Ed and asked, "Who are you smirking at?"

"I'm not smirking. I'm smiling."

"Then smile at me, not at her. Who's been your friend? Who's been eating breakfast with you all these years? Who's Judy-come-lately?" He said all this without even looking over at me. They went back to talking about their favorite fair queens.

I sat and wondered if this was what death was really like: life continues and you watch it but you're separated from it the same way a movie screen keeps you from talking to and touching the actors. In this moment when I sat staring at a plastic fern while two men tried to act like I wasn't there, I realized how lonely death

would be. I wondered if wherever I went to, if there was any place to go, if I would be reunited with all my friends in the afterlife or if I had any to be reunited with.

The thing was, I'd never been close to much of anyone. Chester and I did get along, but I can't say we were close. I could only guess at what went through his mind and assume he could only do the same for me. He couldn't know that I still thought about Clara, a girl who showed up in town for one year of grammar school, became my friend, and then disappeared from my life. He couldn't know the way my visits to the rest home and my volunteer work at the church kept me occupied but that I felt like I was killing time and just filling up the days in my waning years of life.

I didn't break the promise I'd given to Chester about staying silent in the diner but, much to Chester's chagrin, did talk to Ed outside Connell's. I knew Chester would use my talking inside the diner against me but knew he'd just sulk about me talking to his friend outside. I had him on a technicality.

So when the three of us stood outside and felt the humidity, felt the skies threatening to break open for a light shower at any minute, I said, "What's on your schedule today, Edward?"

Ed shrugged. "Is she here now?" he asked Chester.

"If she has to be," Chester said.

Ed looked at me. "I don't know. Thinking about getting my boat out, I guess."

Chester sidled between Ed and me. "Let's get on it."

Ed fell back a step, maybe two, and and shook one of his long fingers at Chester. "Now you're interested in it. Now you want to help." He raised his voice slightly, and I could tell it was all he could do to keep from yelling.

"You quit asking."

"Two months I ask you. Two months. I bring it up to your dear

sister and then, finally, you want to help out. Oh, I just don't believe it. Don't believe it at all."

"I thought it was too early back a couple months ago." Since Chester wasn't treating me so well, I did beam ever so slightly in knowing that I was bringing some grief his way. But I tried as hard as I could to keep any and all expressions off.

I said, "Why don't the three of us get the boat out?"

"We can do it ourselves," Chester said and started walking to the car. "Let me take her home, then I'll come back."

"She looks pretty spry," Ed said. "She'll be good help."

"Honest to God," Chester said.

"We could all three sit in the front of your car. You've got the room." Ed put his hand on my shoulder and started leading me over to the front seat of Chester's car.

"What do you think this is, cozy cousins?" Chester said.

"I just thought it would be fun." Ed's hand dropped off my shoulder like he suddenly realized I was a statue at a wax museum.

"We can't all three sit in front," Chester said. "I get crowded and it's hard for me to drive. She can sit in the back."

My expiration date was coming fast. I wanted to ask Chester to stop off at home so I could fix my hair and put on some more makeup, but I first worried they might drive off without me and then realized how ridiculous it was to think about primping myself before we went to move a boat. After they hooked the boat trailer to the back of the car and we were heading out to the storage sheds, which sat just a turn past the lime pits, I felt like I wasn't even there. It hadn't been much more than a few days since I started fading but I could already feel death wearing me down.

Chester and Ed sat in the front seat and I rode in the back. Ed paid no attention to me beyond occasionally winking at me in the rearview mirror. He didn't even bother to turn around and made no

effort to include me in the conversation. Maybe he'd just forgotten about me, or maybe he didn't want Chester to scold him again. Chester seemed to be in a better mood, my presence not infringing on his time with Ed in the least. I listened to Ed talk about a busboy who worked at Connell's and sold night crawlers and Chester talk about the time he and Ed hooked a fish bomb some moron had thrown in Hoolie's Lake and how they had scrambled to get it out of the boat. I sat alone and silent, the empty boat trailer bumping along behind the car.

Long Division: To understand the word as
symbol (already
(metaphorical): as atom:
as Adam: as seed:
as seen: as Self
egg
earth
body:
as baby, etc.

The pattern always existed
inside us
or the will
to make patterns:
alphabets of design and order.

Though sources differ
as sources do:

1. Symposium's sex division
as the fate of the fall:

("like a sorb-apple before pickling
cleft in two"

because joined they would ascend
and challenge the gods.)

versus

2. The Bible's blaming
Eve-the-other
for the disunity with God

(because she would
have separate knowledge
ripe from the core.)

✧

Snorkel to see the divine
is particular:
at sea depths
the panoply of species
flickers as plein air paintbrush
dabs of color as fish
arrayed as mosaic chips
of glass. (See Darwin's Origin
of Species.)

The first indivisible
was called Atom
then it was split
(the whole world)
and split again.

To stand under: To understand the word as
symbol (already
(metaphorical): as atom:
as Adam: as seed:
as seen: as Self
egg
earth
body:
as baby, etc.

to be as essence
 (beside oneself
 so close the mirror blurs.)

The Self in Freudian triplicate,
superego,
ego, id,

The Trinity's hot spirit
hopping from Father to Son.

Even in the Yin Yang ring
when Male enters and yields
to Female along the undular divide,
we too, you and me, are on either side
and still we talk of yielding.

 You sang that song to me:
 love's pieced and partial mystery:
Man Woman Child, all infinity
given its compass by counting.

 And the echo of your song spread
 like the shadow
 with a lesser presence.

Historically, the humors
were counted as physical
relative balance:

 " That spirit of life...acteth with
 in all creatures, giving them existence
blood phlegm choler and black bile. in three -- to wit, salt, sulphure, and mercury."

In another elementary balance,
substance was triced in fours:

(In painting, elements are:)
(rendered:)

Earth's orchards and seasons
spilled from the horn of plenty,
Pliny's chameleons living on Air
and changing colors
while Juno hangs suspended,
anvils lashed to both feet:
buoyancy and gravity.

Flagrant nightmares with blue-black
manes strike sparks on slate flagstones
with Vulcan-smithed horseshoes of flipped luck,
Fire-quenched with an urn overturned
spilling salt- and sweet-Water
into onto and over the
body's majority of the earth.

(Thinking as nature
like solubility, burning point,
intrinsic to the corpus.)

Eros issues from the egg
of night. Earth springs
from Chaos.
The body becomes
a full chamber
as the quick flash
of knowing charges

the cells to hold spirit
longing for and dreading escape.

Mother, Maya,
creator of illusion, Mammary
tip at the end of the lip,
Sanskrit Ma measuring forth
pacing the distance between
is and is, inner and outer,
He and She. As Mother and
consort of Sky and Time,
as Father to the Son,
the word spoken and flesh
the Sun of the System
the vowel-plucked word
for the unspeakable Jewish God.

Where the mind touches the Real
like sky on the hill at the horizon
there is the word, shaped of lip
and let to air, joined thought to thing
by utterance, passed like a key to escape,
mouth to mouth and then to ear
as the sound of soul, with a light huffing
that's joy to mingle, flutey, hoarse,
outgassed as love, mixed with mortal
lingering, life puff given in a word,
that is and fills a gap, opens and enters
him to me in the untranslated sigh,
the ocean echoing in the hollow filled,
in cooing when the milk is in the mouth
then the sound, unwalled, filleted
of consonant, drawing itself into one A to Z orb,

aspirant, vocative, full of Self,
the world within, beyond, and spoken.

The Tulip Rooms

There is the smell of eggs
waking on a cold skillet.
There is the smell of mushrooms
that I raised into a brother,
and the smell of Canadian geese
under my bed where I hid the sky
as a child. There is the smell of hair
falling out of the vacuum cleaner,
and the smell of a ladder that's been
left outside all of March
and is now too tall for the house.
There is the smell when you're away at work,
the breaths your clothes take in the closet,
the way they heave without you.
There is the smell of mail
slit open and ignored on the table.
There is the smell of a guitar
hunched over a man who has
run out of ideas. Because I carry
the smell of last year's lightning,
I will not touch water. There is the smell
of someone who never talks, which is
the smell of my grandfather suffering in heaven.
There is the smell of rain washing away
the holes in my body, and the smell
of a boy writing his name because

that is how he is told to live.
There is the smell of condoms in a summer
shower, men and women harvesting
for each other the smells of dead forests.
There is the smell of a door opening
with only a cactus plant behind it,
and the smell of the river that is a prayer
for the bridges who swim away and come back.
There is the smell of the homeless while they sleep
and the smell of the homeless in search of food.
There is the smell when my chest hurts,
and helicopters go searching for oxygen
in my halted blood. There is the smell
of a tablespoon holding a lake,
and the smell of a clean sink,
or is it the smell of a day spent licking the nodes
from an injured tulip? There is the smell
of a vaporizer pumping smoke signals,
a smell in your house of a cat you have not seen,
but that you remember from the woman
who brushed against you on the train today.

Letter to My Sister from Manhattan

Dear Colleen,

This week it snowed until there was nothing left in the sky over New York. Parked cars whispered beneath hoods of toboggan powder, two feet deep at 68 East Third, and the wind drove the snow until the city went quiet and I could hear the traffic light freezing between yellow and red. I wasted twelve dollars at Bamboo House, thin chicken soup and MSG served in a dog's tin, pan fried noodles dry as horse grass during drought; but the water was good and so were the pink booths and the fortune cookies that were also pink and looked like snails. I'm failing the Pace Publishing Program where I've gotten mostly A's—publishing is about how deeply you understand the loss that exists between words, books who've died because nobody loved them when they were alive. I like our new cat—a great white potato bag—he doesn't ask what I do for work, and because of that alone I trust him, though he bites my shoulder. Stephanie can't sleep without me tossing in the bed like a rough river, and I remind her the moon's hiding under the stove with our cockroaches again, should I buy more traps, sort out the cold socks, check the blankets for frostbite, and I remember the snow that's buried our tenement, the street filled with ice goliaths, cashiers from Bangladesh at home holding their registers,

I don't know how they keep the apartment from falling,
just that they do, somehow, and I should be helping.
I perform my share and eat what's left in the refrigerator,
and try to heal the icicles coughing on the fire escape.
Stephanie reads the paper because she understands
the missing words, and I mark my books with strawberry jam
so they won't go empty. By the way, we're sharing
with our hibiscus the pottery you bought in Ecuador,
and the cat purrs when I speak to him in your
Guantanamo melodies. Come north where the trains end.
Bring your languages. Bring the refugee you found
learning a new voice in the rain world of the south.
Come to our kitchen and visit, quickly, before
the snow melts and our city is gone.

Robert Krut

Social Graces

—after Burkard

I do not know what not
to do—
little yellow notebook of rules,
tip-toe topics,
gone missing, if I ever had it at all.

Every *good morning* comes out
as a confession,
Every *how are you*,
admission of guilt.

I save time—just put the dunce cap on
when I leave the house,
stay at one end of the bar.

There is a secret I'm bound to
let slip, write on a sugar packet,
pass across the table to your hand.

The light bulb eye sockets of the waitress
shine white light in my glass,
saying *I'm sorry, I'm sorry*—
there's a mosquito frozen
into one of the ice cubes—
I'm really sorry.

Dennis Hinrichsen

Specimen Days

I take my father there to be close to Whitman. To set him down
in the sway of the good poet's voice. All that sun-drench.

Speckled rock. A second chair so they can speak and let the flat
stream bless its jags about their bony ankles. Nobody listening.

Whitman's voice setting fire in my father's ear so he can gasp
finally and that knot in his gut unwind and the lungs uproot. Clear

thought, clear breath: that's what I think the nights
I wake to hear him nebulize—twenty minutes on the thick reed—

his white jazz a cleansing riff, as temporary as music, poured
directly into his throat. He sucks it down, his death. Coughs

a black plug to indicate he's done. If he hated his father any less,
would it matter? If he hated China any less? An epileptic brother

turning blue in the night? The only time I ever saw him weeping,
he was drunk, newly fired, beside the horseshoe lake, the company

car—a Mercury Marquis, jet black—still ticking where I parked it,
the smell of hash long vented from the plush burgundy seats

to a field of beans I'd sped past, radio blaring, until there was
nothing left but pickup trucks and white trash, men like Carlos

Wall who sang Johnny Cash to me those factory shifts, then knifed
a man the morning I dropped him off at 4 AM outside a bar to play

some poker. Who wouldn't sob on such a night? The house
was gone; the car (still ticking, smelling of dope) was gone. The

ghost plant whirled in the Indiana dusk on the will of drunks and
car freaks, men with sockets so ground to dust you could hear

the gristle tweak in wrist and shoulder, all the profit sucked up
in overhead and trim margins, sailing away in the half-empty

trucks. And so I told him, "Fuck it, it's not your life,"
and he just wept, and could not stop weeping.

Radiant spokes: his family. His father dead at fifty-six: who
robbed him. His brother dead at fifty-four: who got the farm.

Mother spiking her heart with nitroglycerin. The second son, lost
son, rolling drunk on the South China Sea, tattoo stinging his

bleeding arm. And so he smoked nights, thirty years, drank
nights, the cheap beer, hidden bottles of Scotch, the home place

burning in his mind like a ruined temple. It is not from
indifference that I walk him here—good son—a locust "like a brass

disk whirling,” water snake and willow, quail and thrush,
swallows in their smart dives and flyaway wheels, so I can turn

away—I can’t go with him, won’t go with him—and he can lean in,
inflate his lungs to their blue, medicinal depths and, with

Whitman turning from wrestling—chest and arms—a poplar at its
socket in the earth, launch forth some last barbaric shout, wild tune.

Rob Cook lives in New York City where he co-edits *Skidrow Penthouse* with Stephanie Dickinson. Work has appeared in *Shampoo*, *Milk*, *The Canary*, *can we have our ball back?*, *Harvard Review*, *New Orleans Review*, *Tiferet*, *Good Foot*, *Poetry International*, *Lit*, *The Bitter Oleander*, *Mudfish*, *Southeast Review*, etc.

N.M. Courtright, an Ohio native, lives in Austin, Texas, where he recently entered fatherhood. His poetry is forthcoming or has recently appeared in *Boston Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *The Kenyon Review Online*, and *Beloit Poetry Journal*, among numerous others, and a chapbook, *Elegy for the Builder's Wife*, is forthcoming from Blue Hour Press. He is a music critic and interviewer for the *Austinist*, and teaches at Southwestern and St. Edward's Universities.

Mark DeCarteret's work has appeared in the anthologies *American Poetry: The Next Generation* (Carnegie Mellon Press, 2000) and *Thus Spake the Corpse: An Exquisite Corpse Reader 1988-1998* (Black Sparrow Press, 2000). His latest chapbook *The Great Apology* was published a few years back by Oyster River Press for which he also co-edited the anthology *Under the Legislature of Stars: 62 New Hampshire Poets*.

Michelle Detorie lives in Kyle, Texas, where she is the writer in residence at the Katherine Anne Porter House. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Chelsea*, *Blackbird*, *Typo*, *La Petite Zine*, *Diagram*, and *Verse Daily*. Her poem "Three Divinations" was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

Ian Ganassi's poetry has appeared in numerous literary magazines, including *The Paris Review*, *The Yale Review*, and *Verse*. New poetry, prose and translations appear and are forthcoming in *Octopus*, *The Journal*, *Elixir*, and *New England Review*.

Susan Grimm is a native of Cleveland, Ohio. Her poems have appeared in *West Branch*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Rattapallax*, *The Journal*, and other publications. In 1996, she was awarded an Individual Artists Fellowship from the Ohio Arts Council. Her chapbook *Almost Home* was published by the Cleveland State University Poetry Center in 1997. In 1999, she was named Ohio Poet of the

Year by the Ohio Poetry Day Association. Her new book of poems, *Lake Erie Blue*, was published in 2004 by BkMk Press.

Dennis Hinrichsen's most recent books are *Cage of Water* from the University of Akron Press and *Message to Be Spoken into the Left Ear of God*, a chapbook from Mayapple Press. With Gerry LaFemina, he co-edits *Review Revue*, a journal dedicated to the review of contemporary poetry.

Melanie Hubbard has work out recently in *Typo* and *Swink*. Her new favorite poet is Mary Ruefle. Hubbard is working on a book about Emily Dickinson's manuscripts and milieu, for which she has just won an NEH Fellowship. She lives in Ruskin, FL, with the poet A. McA. Miller and their daughter, Kylie.

Robert Krut is the author of *The Spider Sermons* (BlazeVOX, 2009). His work has appeared in *Blackbird*, *The Mid-American Review*, *Barrow Street*, and more.

Esther Lee's poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Verse Daily*, *Salt Hill*, *GoodFoot*, *Swink*, *Runes*, *New Orleans Review*, *Eleven Eleven*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, *Passages North*, *Alligator Juniper*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Diner*, *LitRag*, *Folio*, *Faultline*, *Dislocate*, *Sonora Review*, *Five Fingers Review*, and *Born Magazine*. She's been awarded the 2004 Elinor Benedict Poetry Prize, nominated for a 2004 Pushcart Prize and a Ruth Lilly Fellowship, and her manuscript was selected as a "Discovery"/The Nation Award semi-finalist. She currently lives in San Francisco and teaches at New College.

Lee-Ann Liles is a native of Bermuda with her BA in Creative Nonfiction Writing at the College of Notre Dame in Maryland. She was acknowledged in the 1993 Throne Speech in Bermuda, for writing and publishing achievements at the age of 19 and has published in *Poetry Motel* and *Nanny Fanny*.

Arlene Naganawa lives in Seattle, WA. She has published in various magazines, most recently *Diner*, *Crab Orchard Review*, 88: *A Journal of Contemporary American Poetry*, and *New Delta Review*. She was nominated in 2005 for a Pushcart Prize in Poetry.

Fernand Roqueplan works as an interpreter for social services and, seasonally, as a steelhead fishing guide. His work has been published in *Indiana Review*, *Poetry East*, *Florida Review*, *Greensboro Review*, *Pivot*, and *Many Mountains Moving*.

Cynthia Alden Smith is a new writer. She spent 18 years of her professional career in the cable television industry as a sales and marketing executive. She now consults part-time and writes. Cynthia received her BA from Mount Holyoke College. She lives in Venice, California with her standard poodle and cat.

After early successes on stage (Sweeney Todd) and screen (Ghandi), and a brief run with Wham!, **Ben Tanzer** now lives in Chicago where he tends to his vineyards, shoots pool, dabbles in social work, runs, writes, and still manages to spend all sorts of time with his beautiful wife and young sons. Ben is the author of the forthcoming novel *Lucky Man* (Ore Mountain Publishing House) and has had work published in a variety of magazines and journals including *Punk Planet*, *Clamor*, *Rated Rookie*, *Midnight Mind*, *THE2NDHAND*, *Outsider Ink*, *Prose Toad*, *The Truth Magazine*, *Abroad View*, *Pow Wow Paper*, and *Chicago Parent*.

Dennis Vannatta has published stories in many magazines and anthologies, including *Boulevard*, *Antioch Review*, and *Pushcart XV*, and three collections: *This time, this place* and *Prayers for the Dead*, both by White Pine Press, and *Lives of the Artists*, by Livingston Press.

John G. Wallace received his MFA in fiction from Southern Illinois University. He currently lives in Milwaukee, where he is finishing up a degree in library science. His work has appeared in *Laurel Review*, *Washington Square*, *Vermillion Literary Project*, and the *Mississippi Review*.

Sarah Zoe Wexler's writing has been published in the *Washington Post*, *Ladies'Home Journal*, *Pitt Med*, *Three Rivers Review*, *Presstime*, *Nidus*, *Poetry Motel*, and *Collision*, and she is a regular contributor for *Pitt Magazine* and *Pittsburghfashion.com*, where she often covers cultural and style trends. Currently an M.F.A. candidate in the

University of Pittsburgh's Creative Nonfiction program, where she also she teaches creative writing; she will speak about writing pedagogy at the Association of Writers and Writing Programs conference in 2006. Her website is www.sarahzoewexler.com.

Amanda Yskamp's work has appeared in such magazines as *Threepenny Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, and *The Georgia Review* and has twice been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. She lives on the left bank of the Russian River with poet Douglas Larsen and their two children.

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--Boo.

--Arf.

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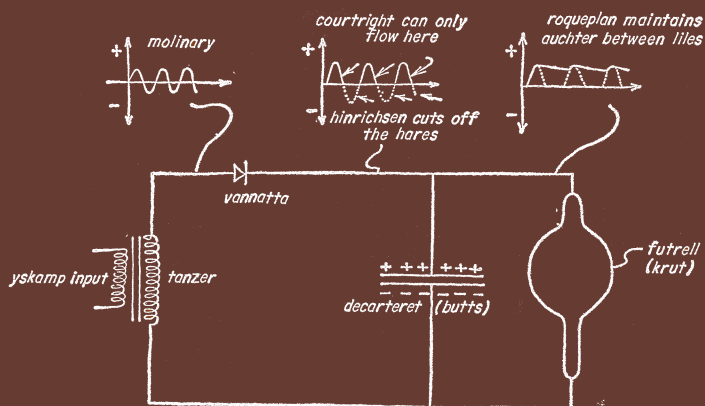


FIG. 10. Steady ~~output~~ is obtained with apparatus including a rectifier and a ~~output~~.

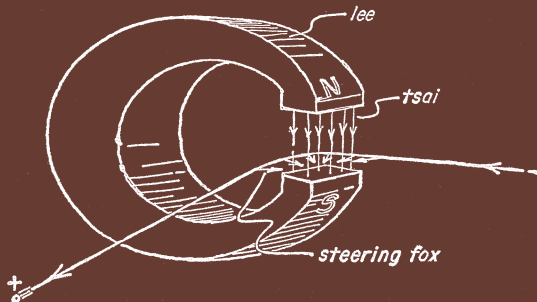


FIG. 20. This schematic diagram shows the deflection of a ~~particle~~ in a magnetic field.